

EXPERIENCES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO HAVE
TAKEN MULTIPLE CONCURRENT ADVANCED PLACEMENT COURSES

by

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EXPERIENCES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO HAVE TAKEN MULTIPLE CONCURRENT ADVANCED PLACEMENT COURSES

An abstract of a Dissertation Proposal by Kristine M. Milburn

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Problem: An increasing number of high-achieving American high school students are enrolling in multiple Advanced Placement (AP) courses. As a result, high schools face a growing need to understand the impact of taking multiple AP courses concurrently on the social-emotional lives of high-achieving students.

Procedures: This phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994) explored the lived experiences of 24 high school graduates who took four or more AP courses during at least one academic year. A single overarching question guided this study: How did taking four or more AP courses during an academic year impact a high school student's life? Using purposeful convenience sampling and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2007; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), data were collected from participants through interviews, detailed field notes, written reflections, follow-up focus groups, and reflexive journaling. Data analysis involved initial coding, recoding, and pruning to derive the essences of the lived experiences. Data were verified through triangulation, thick description, field notes and observations, reflexive journaling, and member checking. Written findings reflect the phenomenological tradition of narrative description to capture participants' lived experiences.

Findings: Data analysis revealed themes that capture the essence of participants' lived experiences while taking four or more AP courses: (a) motivations, (b) stress, (c) extracurricular activities, (d) sacrifices attributed to course load, (e) family, friends, and like-minded classmates, (f) coping strategies, (g) balance, and (h) successes and regrets. The participants' stories reflected the situational uniqueness of each AP student.

Conclusions: Parental support, teacher support, ethnicity as well as friendships and social connections shaped participants' experiences. The power of social media also became evident as participants communicated with the researcher and each other throughout this study. High-achieving students who pursue rigorous AP coursework can benefit from the lived experiences and perceptions of former students.

Recommendations: High schools should provide more resources to high-achieving students who take rigorous AP course loads. Students may benefit ongoing mental health assessments to determine stress levels and coping abilities. Schools might offer seminars and workshops for students, parents, and school personnel in the demands of AP coursework, study skills, time management strategies, stress reduction techniques, healthy habits, and local resources. Schools should also facilitate connections among AP students, both current and former. School personnel may wish to ensure the fidelity of AP curriculum in providing challenging learning experiences rather than more work.

Dedication

To my parents—Larry and Kathy Milburn—who have always encouraged me to follow my dreams and who have equipped me with strength and courage to persevere. Throughout my life, they have served as constant role models of the power of hard work, personal sacrifice, and unconditional love.

To my brother and his family—Scott, Sara, Abigail, and Noah Milburn—who fill my life with laughter, hugs, and love. Their support and understanding continuously lift my spirits, motivate me to live life fully, and inspire me to embrace joy.

To my colleagues, classmates, professors, and mentors who have supported me throughout my doctoral journey. Without their guidance, encouragement, enthusiasm, and assistance, this dissertation would not have come to fruition.

To my friends who have served as my cheerleaders, my companions, and my comforters. Their care and concern have helped me to stay sane and to maintain balance as I travel through life.

Stepping Stones

One day, I decided to stray,
from the smooth stepping stones
that had guided my way.

I set out on my own—
forging a new path,
setting down new stones.

Wherever I go, whatever I do—
whether with friends or alone—
I will continue to plant my feet firmly,
on each stepping stone.

~Kristine Milburn, 2011

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Inside the Classroom

Each August, my classroom fills with fresh faces and open minds, longing to be satiated with new knowledge and stretched with new ideas. I teach English. I teach students how to think, how to express their thoughts effectively, and how to become cognizant citizens of the world. I have never met the majority of students who step into my classroom on the first day of class, though a few may have taken a past course under my tutelage. After entering the room and looking around on the first day of class, most students following the general course of study within the English department¹ soon notice that few, if any, of their friends are among those seated in desks. On this first day, they sit in desks of their choice, engaging in little conversation and waiting for the inevitable seating chart. Often, if the majority of students are upperclassmen, more chatter may occur, depending upon their social engagement and comfort level with peers in the class.

The suburban high school² in which I teach contains approximately 2000 students in grades 10, 11, and 12. When students assemble in most of the over 190 courses offered, they will find a mix of sophomores, juniors, and seniors in their classrooms. Unlike the previous year during which all grade 9 students came together in one building³, sophomores in this building mingle together with juniors and seniors, creating unique amalgamations that often require significant time for social and emotional adjustment. I have observed that, during my years of teaching in this building, few

¹ That is, students who follow the regular, college preparatory track as opposed to those who take the Advanced Placement track.

² Names and identifying details of schools and participants have been eliminated or changed throughout this study to protect anonymity.

³ This district hosts a 9th grade building into which students from two middle schools funnel together.

connections either are forged or flourish within the typical general education classroom environment.

In contrast, I have noticed that many students in this school's Advanced Placement (AP)⁴ classrooms share a unique bond. Most of these students consider themselves high-achieving and driven individuals, as evidenced in the stacks of introductory letters I have collected from my AP students over the years. These letters outline their academic and extracurricular schedules as well as reveal their hopes and dreams for the future. In my own AP Language and Composition class, historically populated by juniors and seniors, I have observed that students are markedly more inquisitive and more talkative with each other as they enter the classroom on the first day of school. Most of them are not new to the AP population in this school, and most of them know each other. Many have taken or are currently enrolled in one or more AP courses together⁵. In fact, my AP students meet during the summer in cyberspace as they introduce themselves and post required responses to summer reading assignments within our class forum.

Consequently, on the first day of class, I have noticed that unlike students in my general English courses, these AP Language and Composition students do not nervously enter the classroom and quickly scan for any familiar face before slumping into an unoccupied seat. Instead, these students normally congregate in groups, taking seats next to each other, catching up with each other, and talking about the summer assignment. A thread of camaraderie and friendship already runs through the class, creating a ready-made social and emotional support network that continues throughout the year. In the

⁴ For more information on AP® courses and testing, as regulated by the College Board, visit <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/Controller.jspf>.

⁵ This high school lists 16 AP courses in the 2010-11 Curriculum Catalog.

beginning, I find myself the stranger among them. Gradually, however, I become part of their stories, of their lives. Within this AP classroom each year, I hear students share common experiences, common stresses, and common victories, which pull them closer to each other. As such, I have observed that the AP classroom becomes a safe, friendly environment in which these high school students with similar stories and backgrounds can count on each other for understanding and support.

Research indicates that teenagers need social and emotional support during their high school years (Hafner, 2010; Holland, Reynolds, & Weller, 2007; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). High school is a time of social and emotional maturation, a time during which teenagers seek to establish themselves within the teenage culture. During this time, teens choose their friends based upon a variety of criteria, including family influence (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Walen, 2003), peer influence (Clasen & Brown, 1985), and academic influence (Gross, 1989). Gifted⁶ teens face the same influences as they establish their network of friends. However, as gifted adolescents progress through the typical high school environment, they may struggle with the social and emotional aspects of their giftedness (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Kerr, Colangelo, & Goeth, 1988; Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 1989). Assouline and Colangelo report that many gifted students feel stigmatized in high school; as a result, they simply want to fit into the norm rather than stand out as gifted. In some cases, the desire to be accepted can lead to underachievement in gifted students (Neihart et al., 2002; Reis & McCoach, 2000). More importantly, however, educational environments that do not meet the needs of gifted adolescents can create stress and

⁶ For the purpose of this study, a “gifted” adolescent is considered as exhibiting “exceptional general intellectual and academic ability or academic achievement” (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006).

adjustment problems (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Neihart et al., 2002). As a result, suggestions abound for creating a safe and comfortable school climate for gifted students (Clasen & Clasen, 2003; Cross, 1997; Hertzog, 2003; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

The responsibility of protecting and nurturing the social-emotional lives of gifted students within schools lies not only with administration, counselors, and endorsed teachers of the gifted but also with all teachers and school personnel who work with gifted students. Using interviews and surveys as well as anecdotal evidence from gifted students across the United States, Assouline and Colangelo (2006) emphasize that recognition of “the social-emotional needs of gifted students will foster both the cognitive and the affective development of gifted youngsters” (p. 82). Many high schools have created appropriate learning environments for gifted students through programs such as AP and IB⁷; however, many schools have not necessarily measured the social-emotional impact of pursuing rigorous coursework on high-achieving students who may not necessarily be intellectually gifted.

Schools must recognize that high-achieving students may not always equate with gifted, or high-ability students. Initially, AP coursework was typically reserved for gifted students as a means of earning college credit; however, no formal, objective qualifications exist for enrolling in AP courses. Today, with more colleges and universities giving special consideration to students who enroll in AP courses, AP coursework is often viewed as a must for college-bound students (Geiser & Santelices, 2006). In fact, the advanced college-preparatory curricula have increased in popularity

⁷ International Baccalaureate. For more information on IB® courses and testing, as regulated by the International Baccalaureate Organization, visit <http://www.ibo.org/>.

across America (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 2006). Hargrove, Godin, and Dodd (2008) studied the college outcomes of five cohorts of Texas public high school graduates and found evidence that AP coursework benefitted students in college GPA, credits earned, and graduation performance. As public awareness of AP's benefits increases, students of all backgrounds and abilities are filling their schedules with more AP courses; and students who take multiple AP courses concurrently must adapt coping strategies to fit the new situations found within AP classrooms.

With the ever-increasing numbers of students across the United States who pursue AP coursework (College Board, *7th annual AP® report to the nation*, 2011; Sadler, Sonnert, Tai, & Klopfenstein, 2010), new challenges continue to emerge. AP coursework is no longer limited to students who are identified as gifted or to students who have benefitted from gifted programming during their elementary and junior high years. In 2010, College Board's AP program consisted of 33 courses and exams (College Board, *Bulletin for AP students and parents: 2010-11*, 2010). According to the *6th annual AP® report to the nation* (College Board, 2010), six pilot states⁸ and 51 schools participated in the 2005 Expansion project designed to increase the opportunities for low-income and minority students to take AP coursework. Project totals indicate a 65% two-year increase in enrollment. Statistics indicate that of the 2,759,888 U.S. high school students in 2004, 548,733 (19.9%) took an AP exam; whereas, of the 3,019,361 U.S. high school students in 2009, 798,629 (26.5%) took an AP exam (College Board, *6th annual AP® report to the nation*, 2010, p. 15).

In 2010, the number of seniors having sat for an AP exam at least once during their high school career jumped to 853,314 (28.3%), of which 508,818 (16.9%) received

⁸ The six participating states are Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maine, Nevada and Wisconsin.

a score of 3+ (College Board, *7th annual AP® report to the nation*, 2011, p. 20-21)⁹. With numbers on the rise, schools must step back to consider how the increase in intense academic requirements of AP courses may influence the social-emotional health of these highly motivated, high-achieving adolescents.

Within my own AP classroom during the past ten years, I have noted a shift in the majority population from high-ability students identified by the district as gifted to high-achieving students pushed to achieve by internal or external forces. In fact, the district allows any student to pursue an AP course, provided that student has completed the indicated prerequisite coursework. Recently, more high-achieving students have enrolled in multiple AP courses in order to earn college credit and to improve their résumés and applications to colleges and universities (Geiser & Santelices, 2006; Sadler et al., 2010). Successful AP exam scores—defined as a score of 3, 4, or 5 out of 5⁹—often results in students earning college credit, depending upon individual college or university policy (College Board, AP Credit Policy Info, 2011; College Board, *7th annual AP® report to the nation*, 2011). The ability to earn college credit appeals both to students and to parents alike, particularly with the recent downturned economy. Earning college credit has the potential to save money and to shorten the amount of time a student spends in college.

Also appealing to students and parents is the promise of college admission. A search of popular college planning websites shows that students are encouraged to take

⁹ The college board reports AP scores on a 5-point scale:

- 5 = extremely well qualified
- 4 = well qualified
- 3 = qualified
- 2 = possibly qualified
- 1 = no recommendation

For more information, consult the Bulletin for AP students and parents: 2010-11 (College Board, 2010).

AP courses to save time and money as well as to give students an edge in the admissions process¹⁰. Additionally, students and parents seek out and listen to advice from former college admissions officers¹¹ as well as former and current deans of admissions¹² that promotes more AP coursework.

Reflecting the recent trends of increased enrollment in AP courses, enrollment in my AP Language and Composition has grown as well. With the promise of college credit both through successful scores on the AP exam as well as through a concurrent enrollment agreement¹³ with a local community college, I have noticed more high-achieving students joining the high-ability students enrolled in the course. That is, students who have not been formally identified by district officials as “talented/gifted”—through Child Study Teams that look for giftedness in the following areas: intellectual, specific academic, creative, leadership and visual/performing arts¹⁴—enroll in my AP Language and Composition course, purportedly for both the college-level experience as well as the college credit¹⁵.

¹⁰ Popular college planning websites include Admissions Consultants (<http://www.admissionsconsultants.com>), College Confidential (<http://www.collegeconfidential.com>), College View (<http://www.collegeview.com>), Fast Web (<http://www.fastweb.com>), The Ivy Coach (<http://www.theivycoach.com>), and My College Guide (<http://mycollegeguide.org>).

¹¹ Michele A. Hernández, former assistant director of admissions, Dartmouth College: Hernández, M. A. (2009). *A is for admission: The insider's guide to getting into Ivy League and other top schools*; Rachel Toor, former college admissions officer, Duke University: Toor, R. (2001). *Admissions confidential: An insider's account of the elite college selection process*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

¹² Peter Van Buskirk, former Dean of Admission at Franklin & Marshall College: Van Buskirk, P. (2007). *Winning the college admission game: Strategies for parents and students*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Peterson's.; Douglas Christiansen, Vanderbilt University: Vanderbilt University. (2007, October 30). *Insiders guide to admissions* [Video]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKARNadxshU>

¹³ Through a concurrent enrollment agreement with a local community college, the high school mentioned offers dual-credit (high school and community college credit) for many of its AP courses.

¹⁴ In this district, these Child Study Teams use criteria from the following: Cognitive Abilities Test, team input, self nomination, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and/or Iowa Test of Educational Development.

¹⁵ Students may opt to receive up to 6 junior college credits—3 per semester—through a local community college.

Yet, the 2010-2011 Curriculum Catalog for this suburban high school still cautions students that AP courses require more study time than general high school courses and recommends that students review their total course schedule, adding a study hall if possible, and that students also review their involvement in extracurricular activities. Despite recommendations, most high-achieving students in this high school push themselves—or are pushed by external forces such as parents or college counselors, the desire to avoid Physical Education, or the demands of their involvement music programs—to fill their eight-period schedules as well as to engage in as many activities as possible. This increased level of curricular and extracurricular involvement is accompanied by expectations to succeed, defined by high grades and leadership roles.

While research indicates that students identified as intellectually gifted may be more adept at using problem-solving strategies to cope with stress than students who are not identified (Preuss & Dubow, 2004; Tannenbaum, 2003), there is a paucity of research that focuses on how high-achieving students enrolled in AP coursework, whether or not identified as gifted, negotiate the lived experience of taking multiple AP courses. Among my own students, I have noticed symptoms of students feeling overwhelmed, including mood changes and sudden drops in performance. As educators begin to look at this subgroup of high-achieving students, they must examine the “lived experiences” (Van Manen, 1990) of its members.

Purpose, Rationale, and Significance

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to aid in the understanding of how students are impacted by taking multiple AP courses, particularly four or more, during at least one academic year. When teachers and administrators have a better understanding of

how students are impacted, more specifically of what types of stresses they face and how they cope with these stresses, then measures can be taken to identify students who need assistance in coping with the stresses and to help future students develop necessary coping strategies. Van Manen (1990) explains, “Educators want to gain insights in the lives of particular students in order to understand them or help them” (p. 71).

To ascertain the impact of taking multiple AP courses on the lives of students, I conducted semi-structured interviews, collected reflective documents, and conducted focus groups of participants whose high school transcripts indicate enrollment in four or more AP courses concurrently¹⁶ to examine for emerging themes. In addition, I engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the process as I analyzed for salient categories and emerging themes. This study focused on the impacts of taking multiple AP courses. I was interested in the participants’ reflections of the past lived experience rather than the perceptions of students currently enrolled in multiple AP courses. I asked participants why they took multiple AP courses. I also asked participants to reflect upon their experiences taking multiple courses—the successes, stresses, challenges, and supports. In order to gain a better understanding of their retrospective perceptions after having graduated from high school, I asked participants whether or not they felt that their AP experiences had helped them or would help them in their future academic endeavors. Their stories and perceptions may help high school personnel understand how high-achieving graduates who took multiple AP concurrently navigated their experiences. In addition, these stories may help current and future high-achieving AP students who choose to pursue a similar educational path.

¹⁶ Two exceptions were made for individuals who pursued equally rigorous course loads but only enrolled in three official AP courses.

As more and more American high school students pursue AP coursework, high schools must prepare to meet not only the academic but also the social-emotional needs of high-achieving students. Through listening and analyzing the lived experiences of high-achieving individuals who enrolled in multiple AP courses while in high school, we can begin to understand to meet the needs of these students. Additionally, these lived experiences may guide future research in the areas of stress and coping strategies within AP programming.

Research Question

As emphasis continues to be placed on taking AP courses both to earn college credit and to impact college admissions, more students, both high-ability and high-achieving, are enrolling in AP courses (College Board, 7th *annual report to the nation*, 2011). In addition, more students are taking multiple AP courses in order to reap greater benefits; that is, more students are taking four or more AP courses concurrently. While research indicates that AP coursework benefits students (Hargrove, Godin, & Dodd, 2008), little is known of the students' lived experiences when they enrolled in multiple AP courses. This study was guided by one overarching question: How did taking four or more AP courses during an academic year impact a high school student's life? More specifically, I wanted to listen to participants' reflective stories and to understand how they made meaning of their experiences.

Definition of Terms

Key terms used throughout this study are defined below.

- Advanced Placement (AP) is a program through The College Board¹⁷ designed to provide students with advanced course material, classroom discussions, and demanding assignments that will help students develop content mastery and critical thinking skills necessary for college coursework (College Board, *Bulletin for AP students and parents: 2010-11*, 2010). In order for a course to be labeled as AP, the school must submit a subject-specific course audit form and the course syllabus for each teacher of the particular course (College Board, n.d.). The AP Course Audit is designed to communicate clear curricular and resource guidelines as well as to ensure college-level criteria across high schools (College Board, n.d.). While enrollment in AP courses is recommended for any student who wishes to sit for an AP exam, any student wishing to take an AP exam may do so, regardless of enrollment in an AP course.
- References to multiple AP courses within this study signify to concurrent enrollment in four or more AP courses during one academic year.
- International Baccalaureate (IB)¹⁸ is a non-profit educational foundation that provides students around the world with rigorous educational opportunities to “develop the intellectual, personal, emotional and social skills to live, learn and work in a rapidly globalizing world” (International Baccalaureate Organization, n.d.). In order to become an IB World School, a school must invest considerable time, effort, and resources for IB recognition; teachers participate in extensive and ongoing training to ensure quality, consistent, rigorous educational standards.

¹⁷ For more information on The College Board and Advanced Placement, visit <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/about.html>.

¹⁸ For more information on International Baccalaureate, visit <http://www.ibo.org>.

- High-ability, in this study, is used synonymously with giftedness, as defined by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC): “A gifted person is someone who shows, or has the potential for showing, an exceptional level of performance in one or more areas of expression” (2008). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (2002) refers to giftedness as

The term “gifted and talented,” when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.

Within the confines of this study, high-ability refers to those students who have been identified by schools as having intellectual giftedness.

- High-achieving refers to a student’s proclivity to work hard to perform at high levels. Kingore (2004) explains, “High-achieving students are noticed for their on-time, neat, well-developed, and correct learning products.” In other words, high-achieving students have a strong desire to succeed and work hard to perform at the top of the class; they are extremely self-motivated and strive to meet or to exceed classroom expectations. In this study, high-achieving refers to students who have enrolled four or more AP courses concurrently.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Providing appropriate educational opportunities in an intellectual environment for gifted students and high-achieving students has concerned researchers and educators for many years. Teachers and schools are charged with the task of nurturing not only the intellectual abilities of gifted and high-achieving youth (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Passow, 1986; Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2009) but also the social-emotional health of these youth (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Neihart et al., 2002; Passow, 1986). Programs such as AP and IB effectively attend to the intellectual needs of gifted and high-achieving teenagers (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004); however, addressing the social-emotional needs of gifted and high-achieving teenagers proves more challenging.

Social-emotional development. The period of adolescence—generally ages 13-19 and grades 6-12 (Adams & Berzonsky, 2003; Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Lerner & Steinberg, 2004)—is marked by physical, mental, and social change. Teenagers are caught up in establishing their own identity, developing their own self-concept (Corey & Corey, 2010). Readers can recall, through personal experience, the turbulence and stress often present during these years, regardless of overall environment. In general, high-ability teenagers face the same social-emotional problems as do other teenagers (Neihart et al. 2002). In addition, research does not indicate that significant social-emotional differences exist between intellectually gifted adolescents and the general population. However, in a review of the literature, Neihart et al. (2002) found that a failure to address

the affective needs of high-ability teenagers often results in an inability to actualize their high potential.

Fostering social-emotional health within an AP classroom remains somewhat enigmatic. Although much has been written about the social-emotional development of adolescents (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Newman & Newman, 2008; Schafer, 2009; Suldo & Shaunessy, 2008) and of gifted students (Adams-Meyers, Whitseel, & Moon, 2004; Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Cross, 2000; Dai, Moon, & Feldhusen, 1998; Reis & Renzulli, 2004; Thistlethwaite, 1959), few articles specifically address social-emotional health within AP classes.

Within the literature addressing the social-emotional development of gifted adolescents, several coping strategies were highlighted. In an unpublished instrument measuring coping skills among gifted/talented adolescents (Buescher & Higham, 1985, as cited in Buescher & Higham, 1990) identified several strategies suggested by young adolescents. The following rank as the top four most acceptable (listed in order): “Accept and use abilities to help peers do better in classes...Make friends with other students with exceptional talents...Select programs and classes designed for gifted/talented students...Build more relationships with adults” (Buescher & Higham, Coping Strategies section, 1990). Building on the research of Buescher and Higham (1990), Swiatek (1995) developed an instrument to measure social coping strategies among gifted students, the Social Coping Questionnaire [SCQ], which established quantitative support for particular coping strategies among gifted adolescents. Swiatek (2001) applied the third iteration of the SCQ, to 212 high-achieving high school students enrolled in honors or AP courses.

The questionnaire asked students to rate, using a Likert-style scale, the extent each of 35 statements was true. Swiatek (2001) verified the following social coping strategies:

- (1) denial of giftedness
- (2) using humor
- (3) maintaining a high activity level
- (4) denying a negative impact of giftedness on peer acceptance
- (5) conformity
- (6) helping others
- (7) minimizing one's focus on popularity

When compared to results from the previous edition of the SCQ, applied to students enrolled in a residential summer program for gifted students, evidence indicated “that similar social coping strategies can be measured among both high school honors students and individuals who participate in competitive-admission summer academic programs for gifted adolescents” (Swiatek, 2001, p. 37).

Another area of significance addresses the forced choices of gifted students in AP and IB programs. Through a series of interviews, Foust, Hertberg-Davis, and Callahan (2008) observed that “AP and IB students believed they could, and should, pursue both academic achievement and social lives, even though they needed to sacrifice sleep in order to do so” (p. 125). Furthermore, even though students chose to balance both academic achievement and active social lives, “most complained of experiencing a great deal of stress as a result of their demanding schedules” (Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2008, p. 126).

Particularly interesting in the literature were studies of college students who had been involved in or were currently involved in gifted programming. These studies repeatedly mentioned friendships and social connections as beneficial coping strategies. Gifted college students who had been interviewed on “their perspectives about the impact that gifted programs had on their lives” (Hertzog, 2003, p. 135) indicated that they had “developed most of their friendships with students who were in class with them...most of their friends were from the gifted program” (p. 138). Hammond, Mc.Bee, and Hébert (2007) conducted a study of college students in an honors program, which revealed that friendships made within the honors program gave students “a sense of safety, a feeling of belonging, and the opportunity to expand upon their own identities by learning from the experiences of others” (para. 27). One particular student in the study noted that “his entire social life revolved around other students in the honors program, an idea that offered him great comfort while simultaneously providing him with an environment in which it would be possible for him to excel” (Hammond, McBee, & Hébert, 2007, para. 27).

Social-emotional health of high-ability and high-achieving high school students. After searching a variety of databases—EBSCO databases, JSTOR, and Wiley InterScience—as well as Google Scholar¹⁹ and Hoagies’ Gifted Education Page²⁰, using multiple combinations of search terms (see Appendix B), I was unable to isolate investigations that specifically addressed the social-emotional needs of high-ability or high-achieving students’ while taking multiple AP courses. However, several recent studies have begun to address the social-emotional health of students within two structured, rigorous high school programs: AP and IB.

¹⁹ Google Scholar can be accessed via <http://scholar.google.com>.

²⁰ Hoagies’ Gifted Education Page can be accessed via <http://www.hoagiesgifted.org>.

In a preliminary empirical investigation, Shaunessy, Suldo, Hardesty, and Shaffer (2006) compared the psychosocial functioning of 122 IB Diploma students to a control group of 179 general education students in the same high school. Researchers measured school climate, academic functioning, life satisfaction, psychopathology, and peer relationships. Overall, results suggested that “students participating in an IB program possess similar or superior levels of psychosocial adjustment relative to their general education peers” (Shaunessy et al., p. 84). Additionally, the IB and general education students showed similar life satisfaction. The IB students shared more positive perceptions of school climate than did their general education peers, particularly in terms of student-teacher and peer relations, and showed higher levels of achievement and more confidence in their academic abilities. Moreover, the IB students studied did not display “higher levels of internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, somatic symptoms)” and “both gifted and high-achieving learners in the IB program reported fewer externalizing symptoms (e.g., delinquent and aggressive behavior) of psychopathology than general education peers” (Shaunessy et al., p. 85). Though the sample was relatively small and unbalanced (significantly more females than males), it begins to explore the gap in research regarding the social-emotional health of students in structured, rigorous high school programs.

Suldo, Shaunessy, and Hardesty (2008) conducted a second empirical study to investigate stress, mental health, and coping strategies among high-achieving IB students. Researchers compared results from 139 students in the IB program of a rural, southeastern school to 168 peers from the general education curriculum in the same school. Students completed a battery of questionnaires which measured perceived stress,

coping skills, psychopathology, life satisfaction, and self-efficacy. As anticipated, students in the IB program perceived more stress, which “co-occurred with compromised mental health” (Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008, p. 286). Also, “perceived stress was positively correlated with anger coping”; whereas, “family communication was negatively correlated with perceived stress” (Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008, p. 286). Thus, coping strategies were found to play a significant role in the mental health and life satisfaction of these high-achieving students. Suldo, Shaunessy, and Hardesty (2008) recognized that this particular study, however, faced important limitations: a small convenience sample from one school in a rural community, the occurrence of hurricanes in this area during the data collection period, and the need for improved methodology.

In a follow-up study, Suldo, Shaunessy, Michalowski, and Shaffer (2008) conducted eight focus groups with a subgroup of 48 participants from the aforementioned larger, quantitative study (Shaunessy et al., 2006). Analysis of the transcripts and comparison with strategies reported by typical high school students using A-COPE (Patterson & McCubbin, 1987, as cited in Suldo, Shaunessy, Michalowski, et al., 2008) indicated that several coping strategies unique to students in the IB program: “actively managing time such that a balanced life was ensured, fixating on problems without taking action, attempting to handle problems alone, sharing assignments with peers, and renegotiating schedules and deadlines” (p. 973). Though the sample was small and limited to students from one rural school and results cannot be generalized, findings indicate that further research, both quantitative and qualitative, is needed to determine stressors and coping strategies not only among high-ability and high-achieving IB students but also among high-ability and high-achieving students in AP programs.

An additional follow-up study analyzed data from two waves of data collection in order to compare the sources of stress for 157 general education students and 162 IB students as well as to determine which stressors were elevated for IB students (Suldo, Shaunessy, Thalji, Michalowski, & Shaffer, 2009). The study verified that the IB students' primary source of stress derived from academic requirements. While general education students also ranked academic requirements as moderate, higher levels of stress were associated with a variety of indicators, including family, peers, life events and academic struggles. The findings also suggested that higher levels of stress associated with specific stressors were more likely to trigger psychopathology and academic problems in IB students: in fact, "IB students may be more sensitive to manifesting adverse effects of stress than typical high school students" (Suldo, Shaunessy, Thalji, et al, 2009, p. 943). Limitations in this study resemble the previously mentioned three studies using the same IB and general education population; however, once again, the research serves as an impetus for further research into the social-emotional health of high-ability and high-achieving students, particularly those students who fill their schedules with AP and/or IB courses.

Three studies explored students' reflective perceptions of their involvement in rigorous, college preparatory programs. Taylor and Porath (2006) surveyed 16 recent IB graduates through a series of 20 statements using a four-point Likert-style scale and seven open-ended questions. A majority of the respondents indicated that students appreciated exposure to a richer and wider curriculum but that "they found the workload to be excessive and very stressful at times while they were in the IB program" (Taylor & Porath, 2006, p. 154). Though 87.5% of respondents felt "better prepared for

introductory-level postsecondary courses than those not in IB,” only 50% felt “less stressed than their non-IB counterparts” (Taylor & Porath, 2006, p. 154). From a retrospective, the majority of respondents attributed their ability to pursue their career goals to the IB program.

In a study that examined participant perceptions of students enrolled in AP and IB programs, Vanderbrook (2006) interviewed five females who were identified as intellectually gifted and currently enrolled in an AP or IB program. Though the IB program specifies particular advanced coursework throughout high school, the AP program does not require students to take a particular number of AP courses. This study did not indicate the number of AP courses in which participants were enrolled. In a series of three phenomenological interviews conducted with each participant, Vanderbrook strove to understand their lived experiences within the rigorous academic programming. In terms of challenge, participants did not specifically reference curricular challenge; instead, they noted “grades,” “workload,” time management, and “year-end tests” (Vanderbrook, 2006, p. 140). Most noticeable within the participants’ lived experiences were the perceived positive or negative relationships with their teachers, the supportive relationships with their intellectual peers, and the need of supportive counseling to meet their career and emotional needs.

After analyzing the participants’ lived experiences, Vanderbrook (2006) concluded that the particular AP and IB programs studied “need to improve their support for the nonacademic needs of gifted learners, through methods such as career counseling and emotional support” as well as need to ensure that teachers in these programs are “knowledgeable about gifted education and effective instructional strategies for gifted

students” (p. 146). Despite the small sample size and potential sample bias, this study invites further research in the students’ perceptions of the nonacademic aspects of AP and IB programming.

The third investigation of participating students’ perceptions of AP and IB (Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009) conducted focus group semi-structured interviews with 84 students representing school and participant demographics from a larger study (Hertberg-Davis, Callahan, & Kyberg, 2006). This study mingled AP and IB students and did not indicate how many AP courses in which participating students were enrolled. Foust, Hertberg-Davis, and Callahan (2009) noted that these students perceived particular advantages from their AP and IB programs including a positive, supportive classroom atmosphere; well-prepared teachers who afforded students more respect and responsibility; and close, supportive relationships they developed with their classmates (Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009, Perceived Advantages section, para. 1). Among the perceived disadvantages, students reported “(a) the perception of unflattering stereotypes assigned to AP and IB students, (b) the heavy workload, and (c) stress and fatigue” (Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009, Perceived Disadvantages section, para. 1). Students’ perceptions within this study indicate a need for further investigation in the social-emotional health of students in rigorous programming such as AP and IB.

Within the available research addressing the social-emotional health of high-ability and high-achieving students, there is a significant need for further research focusing on students’ perceptions, through their lived experiences, of taking four or more concurrent AP courses.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Overview

In addressing perceptions, qualitative research provides the tools and language appropriate to describe, analyze, interpret, and present meanings in such a way as to best represent the participants' perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Reichardt & Rallis, 1994; Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Within the qualitative tradition, multiple approaches exist (Creswell, 2007). In this study, I was particularly conscious of the participants' perceptions of their experiences and emotions during high school, particularly the year in which they had taken four or more AP courses concurrently; and I accepted their words and actions as representative of their perceptions. I endeavored to highlight their voices. The focus on participants' "lived experiences" (Van Manen, 1990) aligns with the phenomenological approach to building the study and interpreting the data. Van Manen explains:

Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p. 36)

As "phenomenology always addresses any phenomenon as a *possible human experience*" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 58, emphasis in original), this approach is best suited to exploring students' perspectives on how taking four or more AP courses during consecutive

semesters may have impacted their lives. A brief overview of phenomenology will help readers understand the background of this approach.

Phenomenology

A research approach should guide a researcher's overall design. As a research approach, phenomenology focuses on the "lived experiences" (Creswell, 2007, p. 57; Groenewald, 2004; Van Manen, 1990) of individuals. The researcher will "focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon...[with a] purpose...to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 58).

As a researcher, I prefer "hermeneutical phenomenology," or "research...oriented toward lived experiences" as understood in phenomenology and "interpreting 'texts' of life" as revealed through hermeneutics (Creswell, 2007, p. 59), through which researchers reflect on essential themes, then interpret "the meaning of the lived experiences" (p. 59). In this phenomenological form, the researcher will rely primarily on interviews, at times supplemented by documents, observation, and art, to analyze for the "essence" of the experience—what was experienced and how it was experienced—that leads to deep understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Unlike other forms of qualitative research, phenomenology "attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 11). The phenomenological approach allows the researcher an in-depth look into the lives, the experiences, the perceptions of her participants, which will subsequently lead to greater awareness of the phenomenon. In particular,

The point of phenomenological research is to “borrow” other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 62)

Phenomenology is the lens through which the researcher may easily define, clarify, and interpret any particular phenomenon.

Realizing the importance of my own involvement in the research as well as my personal lens through which I interpret the data, I am drawn toward phenomenology as best suited to addressing the overarching question of how taking four or more AP courses during consecutive semesters may impact an adolescent’s life. Phenomenological research provides a “tactful thoughtfulness: situational perceptiveness, discernment, and depthful understanding” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 156) through which I might interpret the phenomenon.

A specific caution to me as a phenomenological researcher, however, involves my connection to the phenomenon. Van Manen (1990) cautions that knowing too much about the phenomenon may “predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before we have even come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question” (p. 46). With this in mind, I continually attempted to “bracket” my beliefs and assumptions, not by ignoring them or attempting to forget them but by illuminating my “understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 47). Through constant clarification of my presence during the research process, through written field notes and reflexive journaling, I was able to recognize “growing self-

awareness and self-knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 17), both critical to the interpretation of participants’ lived experiences.

Participants

In accordance with IRB procedures, I completed the required human subjects compliance training²¹ (see Appendix A). I obtained written approval to conduct the study from Drake University’s Institutional Review Board. In addition, I obtained written approval from all participants prior to data collection, using an informed consent (see Appendices E, G, & J). My preliminary research plan indicated my desire to conduct six interviews—three male and three female—and to gather 20 written reflections—10 male and 10 female. Drawing from these 26 participants, I then planned to conduct a focus group of five to seven willing participants.

I established general criteria to narrow the potential participant pool:

- 1) currently 18 or older,
- 2) enrolled in four or more AP courses for two or more consecutive semesters while in high school,
- 3) ability to participate in an interview or provide a written reflection,
- 4) willingness to sign a consent form,
- 5) willingness to submit a high school transcript to verify enrollment in four or more AP courses.

In addition to locating participants to fit these criteria, I wanted to hear the stories of students similar to the demographic of my own AP classroom so that I may better understand and serve my future AP students. Thus, I looked for students who attended

²¹ National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research web-based training course, “Protecting Human Research Participants.”

larger Midwest high schools that offered a wide variety of AP courses, with graduating classes ranging from 400-700 students. To establish my initial participant pool, I engaged in purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007) through a convenience sample (Creswell, 2007; Henry, 1990) from which I then drew my interviewees. This initial sample derived from graduates of one large, suburban, Midwest high school with potential to fit the aforementioned criteria.

On August 2, 2010, I contacted 11 high school graduates who had enrolled in multiple AP courses during the 2005-2009 school years and who were pursuing post-secondary education. At this point, I opted not to contact 2010 graduates who may qualify for research until they had attended at least one semester of post-secondary education; for I wanted participants to be able to have some time and distance between the actual experience and their recollection of the experience. The primary motivation for using graduates in this research was based on my desire, as a researcher, to obtain retrospective data of lived experiences instead of data from current students. These graduates were limited to those for whom I was able to procure current contact information. In most cases, current contact information was obtained through social media.

In truth, the age of my potential participants influenced the use of social media as my primary means of contact. Prensky (2001) defines today's young adults as "digital natives" who are accustomed to "receiving information really fast" (p. 2). A recent study published by the National School Board Association (2007) notes that 81% of students, ages 9-17, with online access "say they have visited a social networking web site within the past three months and 71% say they use social networking tools at least weekly" (p.

1). With this information in mind, I contacted the first 10 individuals—six male and four female—on my list via a short, opening Facebook²² message:

I'm sure you didn't expect me to contact you via Facebook; however, as I began collecting data for my dissertation, I realized that you may fit the criteria for participants. I would like to ask you if you would consider participating or if you would be willing to share names of others who attended [large, Midwest] high schools...who might be willing to participate. I will send a separate note with details. It may be easier to read via e-mail; do you have an e-mail address to which I might send the request? Thanks in advance for your time and consideration.

I opted to send a short message in order to catch the attention of potential participants and followed the short, opening message with the full initial invitation protocol (see Appendix C).

In the full initial invitation protocol, I asked identified individuals to become participants in my research, provided these individuals with my general criteria for participants, and requested them to recommend friends and acquaintances from across their Midwest state who may fit the given criteria. I also encouraged initial respondents either to provide me names and contact information of potential participants to whom I could send a prepared invitation protocol (see Appendix D) or to forward the initial invitation protocol itself (see Appendix C) to additional potential participants. This snowball sampling technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 72) proved useful throughout the study.

²² Facebook is a popular web-based social networking system to which many students and young adults subscribe. For more information, see <http://www.facebook.com>.

Of the first 10 contacts, seven individuals qualified and agreed to participate in the study, one did not qualify to participate, and two did not respond. Additionally, respondents provided names and contact information for 13 potential participants. I then extended invitations to these recommended participants via e-mail and/or Facebook messages to ascertain their willingness and ability to participate in this study. As a general rule, if I could obtain a current e-mail address, I sent the full initial protocol to the e-mail address instead of Facebook. I also asked the recommended participants to provide more names in order to broaden the participation pool, thus continuing snowball sampling technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 72). The use of social media as a communication tool throughout the study provided greater flexibility in arranging individual interviews, obtaining written reflections, and assembling follow-up focus groups. The second wave of invitations sent throughout the remainder of August, 2010, resulted in a few more participants: five qualified and agreed to participate, one did not qualify, and seven did not respond.

From the participant pool gathered in August 2010, five individuals—three female and two male—indicated a strong preference to sit for an interview prior to the start of their respective colleges; thus, I scheduled and completed these five interviews in August, thanks in part to the ease and expediency of Facebook, e-mail, and text messaging. The remaining seven participants indicated a preference for written reflections, which I collected by e-mail throughout the following months.

For those who agreed to send written reflections, all correspondence and consent forms were sent via e-mail. Submission of written reflections as well as transcripts to

verify having taken four or more AP courses during two consecutive semesters signified consent (see Appendix H); however, most participants provided electronic signatures²³.

Indeed, throughout the research journey, I was a bit surprised by the prolific use of new technology to communicate with participants. Perhaps my preconceived notions regarding the necessity for formality when conducting research shaped my thoughts that new technology was, in some way, too informal to be worthy of scholarly research. Prensky (2001) notes that “e-mail, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of [today’s students’] lives” (p. 1). At one point, I logged the following thoughts in my reflexive journal (Krefting, 1999) regarding personal perceptions of both my population and its use of new technology:

I feel as if my population is a bit flighty. Interviews are scheduled quickly and somewhat at the last minute. This is indicative of the age group, most likely, as participants have ranged from 18-23 thus far. They are also very technologically connected. It’s amazing that almost all initial contacts have been made via Facebook; and communication primarily takes place between Facebook and e-mail. I’ve also provided my cell phone number to those who agree to interviews because it’s often easier for them to text or phone. At least it’s more immediate.

Prensky refers to “digital natives” and “digital immigrants”; I find myself rooted in the latter category, yet my participants fall into the former. Therefore, in order to maximize both the gathering of participants and the gathering of data, I followed Prensky’s advice and adapted to the language of the “digital native.”

²³ Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person’s typed name, their e-mail address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.

Once colleges resumed and I returned to work for the 2010-2011 academic year, data collection slowed considerably. Potential participants grew busy with their scholarly pursuits, and I was immersed in teaching a new collection of students. However, I continued to gather contact information of potential participants through snowball sampling and continued to send invitations. I posted a short invitation as a status update on my Facebook²⁴ page:

Research participants needed: Individuals over the age of 18 who took 4+ AP courses concurrently during high school to share their experiences via an interview or a written reflection. Participants will receive a Starbucks gift card for their participation. If you're interested or know someone who might be interested, please contact me for further details.

I also asked members of my English department to brainstorm names, though all suggested names of individuals already on my list.

In November 2010, anticipating fall break—a time during which most colleges provide students with a brief respite from academic pursuits—as well as winter break—a time during which many college students return home to spend time with families—I sent new requests to 29 individuals who had graduated in May 2010. These names were gleaned from a list of students who had initiated an Honors Diploma program²⁵ at their large, suburban, Midwest high school, which sets rigorous academic requirements for high-ability and high-achieving students. Thus, this recent graduating class had more

²⁴ Facebook allows users to post short updates that can be viewed by users' friends.

²⁵ This Honors Diploma program targets high-ability and high-achieving students who have a minimum GPA of 3.5 after completion of their freshman year. The program requires students to follow prescribed coursework, which (in the normal progression) includes 2 AP courses during their sophomore year, 3 AP courses during their junior year, and 4 AP courses during their senior year. Students will successfully complete 62 credits, maintain a 3.5 GPA, and present a senior exhibition in order to be awarded an Honors Designation on their diploma at graduation.

students who took four or more AP courses concurrently during at least one of their high school years. In this case, I was able to use e-mail addresses to contact these 29 graduates.

I received 10 responses in total to my e-mail request; nine respondents indicated that they fit the study criteria. After consulting transcripts to verify enrollment in four or more AP courses concurrently during one year, I learned that two of these nine actually did not fit the criteria. One female respondent had taken only two AP courses concurrently during any of her high school years; however, she so desperately wanted to help, to make her opinions and reflections known, that I allowed her to sit for an interview.²⁶ I did not include this data in my findings, though. One male respondent had only taken three AP courses concurrently during any of his high school years. Because he, too, wanted to be of some assistance, I invited him to send his thoughts through a written reflection. Since he more closely matched the criteria—taking three instead of four AP courses concurrently but taking one additional advanced course during each semester²⁷—I did include his data in my study. In addition, this particular respondent provided contact information for his roommate who was also willing to participate. Even though his roommate had not graduated from a Midwest high school, I was eager to obtain his views and accepted his willingness to submit a written reflection. This participant graduated from a large, suburban high school on the East coast.

²⁶ This interview was not transcribed, and gathered data was not used in this study.

²⁷ Each additional advanced course prepared students for an AP exam as well, if students chose to take the exam.

This wave of participant inquiry resulted in the scheduling of three interviews during winter break—two male and one female²⁸—and the gathering of six written reflections. At this point, I had seven committed interviews—four male and three female—as well as 13 committed written reflections—10 male and 3 female. Upon transcript verification of taking four or more AP courses concurrently for one year, I learned that another one of the male written reflection respondents did not meet this qualification. However, similar to an aforementioned participant, this respondent had taken equally rigorous coursework²⁹; therefore, I included his data.

I decided to focus further attempts on gathering written reflections. In particular, I noticed the gender disparity of more male than female respondents in gathering written reflections; so I looked to increase female participation. I continued to send invitations to recommended individuals, striving to obtain a relatively balanced population of males and females willing and able to submit written reflections.

I sent requests to three individuals who graduated prior to 2010, knowing that these students might not fit the participant criteria but that they might have friends or classmates who fit the criteria and who would be willing to participate. Though they all responded with desires to help, none were able to procure additional participants.

In December 2010, I posted the initial invitation protocol (see Appendix C) on the Gifted-Teachers ListServ, hosted by University of Iowa's Belin-Blank Center,³⁰ which reaches out not only to K-12 educators but also to post-secondary instructors and

²⁸ As previously indicated, this participant did not meet research criteria; thus, data from this participant was not used in the study.

²⁹ This participant enrolled in 4 AP courses during first semester and 3 AP courses plus an equally rigorous course during second semester.

³⁰ The Connie Belin and Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.

researchers as well as parents and stakeholders in gifted education. I received no responses; however, I suspect that my timing—mid-December, the end of academic semesters and the start of winter break—was far from optimal for gleaning responses.

After winter break, I resumed my quest to gain additional participants, particularly those willing to submit written reflections. I began by again posting a brief request as a Facebook status update in January 2011, reflecting a slight revision of my previous invitation posting:

Research participants needed: Individuals of various ages who took 4+ AP courses concurrently during high school to share their experiences via a written reflection. Participants will receive a Starbucks gift card for their participation. If you're interested or know someone who might be interested, please contact me for further details.

I also posted the same request on the Facebook walls³¹ of several of my close friends who have a knack for networking. As was the apparent trend, these postings did not serve to garner additional interest, unfortunately; however, they did serve to remind a few potential participants to whom I had sent a message earlier.

As a result of few responses, I contacted a local teacher of gifted/talented students to garner a few more names of graduates who might qualify, and I sent three additional requests via Facebook. None responded.

This teacher had also suggested that I contact the counselor at a regional academy that provides rigorous academic programming for local students. This regional academy located in an urban setting in the Midwest offers students a variety of career and technical

³¹ Facebook allows users to post messages on friends' walls that can be viewed by others connected to those friends.

programming as well as a wide range of AP and IB programming. This suggestion proved beneficial as the counselor offered contact information for three individuals, two of whom responded affirmatively, though only one sent a written reflection.

As I continued my push for participants, I posted the initial invitation protocol (see Appendix C) to the aforementioned Gifted-Teachers ListServ once again in January 2011. This time, I received one response from a teacher who was willing to present her thoughts regarding students taking four AP courses concurrently. Since my study focused on the lived experiences of individuals who pursued four or more AP courses concurrently, rather than on the experiences of teachers who work with these individuals, I responded with my gratitude and invited her to pass along my invitation to any individual she might know who would qualify. She did not reply.

During this time, I also sent reminders via e-mail to two individuals who had promised to send written reflections. Within days, both of these individuals sent their reflections, and one sent a list of suggested contacts. After sending requests to the five individuals she recommended, I collected one additional written reflection. Responses and written reflections continued to trickle in through e-mail and Facebook during the months of January and February 2011.

Following the transcription of the first interview and the receipt of the first written reflections, I began coding and recoding the collected data to look for salient themes. This process will be explained further in the Data Analysis section. I continued to read through interview transcripts and written reflections on a regular basis in order to maintain consistent exposure to data. In March 2011, while reading through written reflections once again, I noted a participant's mention of his three sisters' "impressive

academic records.” Dave Gretson³² was finishing his senior year of college. His sisters were 3, 5, and 8 years older; all had attended the same Midwest, suburban high school, and all were AP students who took four or more AP courses concurrently for one year during their high school career.

Taking a chance, I contacted Dave Gretson to ask if his sisters might be qualified and willing to participate in this study. I sent the following e-mail:

First, allow me to thank you again for your participation in my dissertation study.

I'm still gathering written reflections and have collected far fewer female voices than male. While rereading your written reflection, I noted your mention of your sisters' academic records. I would like to inquire as to whether or not they took 4+ AP courses concurrently and, if so, whether any would consider submitting a written reflection as well.

Much to my delight, Dave responded with contact information for two of his three sisters who qualified and were willing to participate. I sent the informed consent and written reflection protocol through e-mail to these potential participants, and both sent replies within days.

By mid-April, I had collected written reflections from 17 participants—12 male and 5 female. Two of these 17 participants did not fully meet requirements; however, I deemed their input valuable. Ralph enrolled in three AP courses for a full year and added an additional highly rigorous class—Advanced Political Cultures—that prepared students to take the AP examination upon completion of the course. Also, Ralph was involved in debate as an extracurricular activity during his high school career, an activity associated

³² Pseudonyms are used throughout this study to protect anonymity. This participant selected his own pseudonym.

with high volumes of research and study. Evan only took three AP courses concurrently during a single year, as well; however, similar to Ralph, Evan enrolled in two additional semester-long courses³³ which prepared students for the corresponding AP examination upon completion. Unlike the interview participant who only took two AP courses concurrently, however, I chose to include these two individuals in the data because they more closely met requirements and offered some interesting comparative thoughts.

The overall total of fully qualified participants equaled 22—14 male and 8 female. The two additional partially qualified participants, Ralph and Evan, also appear in participant data (see Table 3.1). Thus, 24 participants contributed to data collection. All interview participants graduated from a Midwest, suburban high school. Of the participants who submitted written reflections, 14 were also graduates of the same Midwest, suburban high school. The three other participants submitting written reflections were male: one graduate of a large, Midwest high school in a university town; one graduate of a regional academy in a Midwest, urban setting; and one graduate of a large, Eastern, suburban high school.

The participants represent a range of ages and backgrounds. The oldest participant, a 30-year-old pediatrician, graduated from a Midwest, suburban high school. Two of her siblings, a 24-year-old female and a 22-year-old male who graduate from the same high school, also submitted written reflections, representing a range of experiences within the same family and same high school. The three youngest participants—all male—were 18 years old: two graduated from the same Midwest, suburban high school previously mentioned, and one graduated from a large, Midwest high school in a

³³ Advanced Political Cultures and Advanced Economics—both courses are designed to prepare students for an AP exam: AP Government and AP Economics, respectively.

university town. The remaining participants fell between these two ages. Table 3.1 illustrates the participant demographics, as identified by participants and researcher.

Fourteen of these 24 participants indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up focus group by answering “yes” in response to the initial invitation protocol (see Appendix C), and two additional participants wrote in “maybe.” On April 25, 2011, I sent the focus group invitation protocol (see Appendix I) to the 16 individuals. I realized that most participants were undergraduate or graduate students; therefore, I knew my window of opportunity was brief due to summer obligations. I offered four potential dates, and it soon became evident that the two offered Saturday dates would work best for most. However, initially, I was unable to assemble a group of five to seven, as was my original plan. Flexibility had proven crucial throughout this study, so I adapted to participant schedules and decided to conduct two focus groups: June 4 and June 11, 2011.

Despite my desire to balance gender representation during each focus group, I discovered that this balance proved difficult to achieve. At first, three participants agreed to assemble on June 4, 2011—two female and one male. I sent reminders to participants who had agreed to the first group on the Monday prior to this session, which included the focus group protocol. In addition, I sent the reminder and protocol to the two individuals who had asked me to contact again closer to the date, one of whom agreed to participate, bringing the total projected participants to four—two female and two male. On the date of the focus group, three of the four arrived to contribute. The first focus group consisted of Anne, Shriya, and Rex.

The following Monday, after sending the first focus group recording to the transcriptionist³⁴, I sent reminders to the five participants who agreed to convene for the second focus group session—two female and three male. I also sent invitations to two additional candidates, both male; to the participant who was not able to attend the first session, as he had indicated no preference between the two planned session dates; and to an additional candidate who indicated verbally during a chance encounter of his willingness to participate. Sophia, one of the female participants responded: “I am not going to be able to make it back to Iowa for the weekend, but I would be available to Skype in order to be a part of the group. Would that work?” As I could foresee no reason why the popular videoconferencing program would not work for the focus group, I responded affirmatively. Plus, I did want the input from another female participant. I projected seven participants in the second focus group session: two female and five male. Sophia and I tested Skype the day prior to the focus group session, and I called the local library to ensure adequate wireless capabilities. Since two individuals did not attend, only five individuals participated in the second focus group: Aaron, Dee, John, Ronald, and Sophia (via Skype).

Furthermore, I sent focus group written reflection protocols (see Appendix L) via e-mail to two individuals who indicated their willingness to provide input but could not attend either session.

³⁴ As with all audio recordings, unless otherwise noted, I started the transcriptions with assigned pseudonyms before employing a transcriptionist to complete the transcription of recorded data. For the first focus group, I transcribed the 15 minutes of the 68-minute session. For the second focus group, I transcribed 30 minutes of the 79-minute session.

Table 3.1. Participant Demographics

Pseudonym (*self-selected)	M/F	Age	Ethnicity	Interview	Written Reflection	Focus Group
Aaron	M	18	Caucasian		X	X
Abby	F	24	Caucasian		X	
Anne	F	30	Caucasian		X	X
Dave Gretson*	M	22	Caucasian		X	
Dee	F	19	Asian-American, Taiwanese		X	X
Elliott	M	22	Asian-American		X	
Evan	M	19	Caucasian		X	
Heath	M	18	Caucasian	X		
Jake	M	19	Not identified		X	
James Franco*	M	18	Asian-American, Chinese immigrant		X	
Jane*	F	22	Caucasian		X	
Jennifer	F	20	Caucasian	X	X	
Jessica*	F	20	Asian-American, Chinese immigrant	X		
Jimmy Diesel*	M	18	Not identified		X	
John*	M	20	Asian-American, Indian immigrant	X		X
Kevin Elias*	M	19	Caucasian	X		
Marcus	M	20	Not identified		X	
Michael*	M	19	Caucasian		X	
Ralph*	M	22	Caucasian		X	
Rex*	M	20	Asian-American, Indian		X	X
Ronald*	M	19	Caucasian	X		X
Sam	M	20	Asian-American, Indian		X	X (written)
Shriya*	F	20	Asian-American		X	X
Sophia*	F	22	Caucasian	X		X (Skype ³⁵)

In response to the request for a written focus group response, one participant briefly provided his thoughts on several self-generated, summarized categories addressed by the focus group protocol:

- Impact of AP on post-high school lives.

³⁵ Skype provides video conferencing capabilities. For more information, see <http://www.skype.com>.

- Stress during the year of 4+ AP courses—impacts? benefits? detriments?
- Coping strategies during the year of 4+ AP courses—what worked? what didn't? what do you wish you would have done differently?
- Balance during the year of 4+ AP courses—definition? did you try to find balance? did you achieve balance? how can others who seek balance during the year of 4+ AP courses find balance?

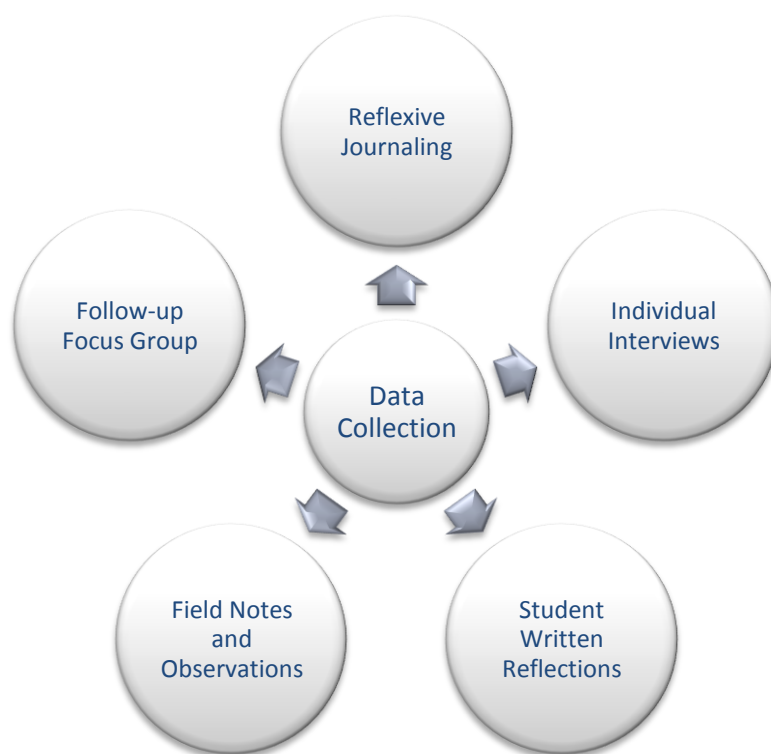
His thoughts in response to these categories complemented the perceptions gleaned through the focus group, providing evidence of similarities among participants.

All participants grew up in similar surroundings within semi-affluent communities in which they attended high school. All focus participants deemed themselves as academically successful³⁶ in their AP coursework. The school and the community joined their parents in stressing the importance of a quality education and ensuring that the participants took advantage of the opportunities provided. All interview and focus group participants received a \$10 StarbucksTM gift card for their assistance; all written reflection participants received a \$5 StarbucksTM gift card for their assistance.

Throughout the interviews and focus group, I recorded detailed field notes and observations in order to add depth to the data collection process. In addition, I engaged in reflexive journaling that allowed me to bracket my preconceived understandings and biases, to clarify the research process as I progress through the data, to record personal reactions, and to illuminate self-awareness and self-knowledge. I will further explain the processes of recording field notes and observations as well as reflexive journaling within the section on data collection. Figure 3.1 illustrates the data collection points.

³⁶ All participants received average and above average grades, based upon the standard A, B, C, D, F grading scale, overall in their AP coursework, as self-reported and verified through transcripts.

Figure 3.1. Data Collection Points



Data Collection

Congruent with the methodological approaches—qualitative research and phenomenology—this research was built upon a unique situation, one dependent upon myself, as researcher; the participants; and the context of this study. To increase the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of this study, I implemented several data collection and analysis strategies to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Krefting, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In reality, my lens as both researcher and as an AP teacher impacted my interpretations of the participants’ perceptions as well as the perceptions the participants

reported. As a result, reflexivity (Creswell, 2007) was an important component of this study.

Throughout the study, I kept a reflexive journal to record my thoughts and biases; and I recorded field notes and observations immediately following each interview and focus group. These procedures helped to ensure both the credibility and confirmability of the data and the interpretation.

Reflexive journaling. An integral component of my research process, from beginning to end, was reflexivity (Bulpitt & Martin, 2010; Creswell, 2007; Johnson, 1999; Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009; Krefting, 1999; Ortlipp, 2008; Van Manen, 1990). Though several authors use reflective and reflexive journaling interchangeably, I will use the term *reflexive journaling* in order to differentiate between the written reflections of my participants and the journal reflections that I keep. My reflexive journal examined my own thoughts, feelings, perceptions, biases, reactions, interpretations, and analyses throughout the process. For example, my first entry on March 4, 2010, notes both my excitement and my apprehension: “Greetings...I’m counting this as my first entry of my dissertation journey. I don’t know whether I should be excited or nervous...maybe a little of both.” As I read through my reflexive journal regularly, I relived not only the steps taken to complete the study but also the anticipation and anxiety related to the journey. I also was able to evoke memories of events that have shaped both my own life and the lives of those around me during the past 18 months: birthdays, shopping trips, theatre performances, oil spills, pops concerts, dance recitals, tee-ball games, floods, family moves, vacations, roommates, illnesses, holiday celebrations, funerals, earthquakes and tsunamis, royal and not-so-royal weddings, the

death of Osama bin Laden, tornados, graduations, reunions, more flooding, anniversaries, births—just to name a few.

At the heart of my reflexive journal, however, is the spirit of my research. Essentially, reflexive writing afforded greater depth and understanding to the phenomenon studied; indeed, “responsive-reflective writing is the very activity of doing phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990, p. 132). In particular, reflexivity relates to the “bracketing” or “reduction” process, as Van Manen (1990) further explicates. Throughout my reflexive journal, I address my potential bias as an AP teacher. At one point, I wrote, “They all want to help me out, knowing...that I am an AP teacher who might be able to impact programming in schools. I do feel, though, that these participants have been honest and open with their thoughts and opinions. I don’t really think they’ve held back.” My ability to realize and record these thoughts and perceptions into my own interpretations allowed greater lucidity and insight into the research process. In qualitative research, Ortlipp (2008) encourages the use of self-reflective journals to facilitate reflexivity, thus “creating transparency in the research process” (p. 696). Into my reflexive journal, I copied all forms of communication sent through e-mail, ListServ, and Facebook. I also summarized all informal verbal conversations involving the progression of my dissertation.

In addition to increased transparency, reflexivity added to the credibility (Krefting, 1999), validity (Johnson, 1999), and trustworthiness (Bulpitt & Martin, 2010) of the data collection and analysis. Furthermore, “Exploration of personal beliefs makes the investigator more aware of the potential judgements [*sic*] that can occur during data collection and analysis based on the researcher’s belief system rather than on the actual

data collected from participants” (Jootun et al., 2009, p. 43). Thus, my reflexive journal permitted me to acknowledge my thoughts, map my decisions, and record my own lived experiences throughout the course of the study.

Interviews. Individual interviews allowed me to explore and gather “experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” as well as develop “a conversational relation” with the participant “about the meaning of an experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 66). Focusing on participants’ lived experiences, I conducted eight individual interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix F). As indicated earlier, one of these interviewees did not fully meet my research criteria, which I had suspected when she agreed to participate. At the time she agreed, though, I did not realize that she only had taken two AP courses concurrently during any year of her high school career. I discovered this fact when she shared her transcript during the interview. She had truly wanted to help, and I didn’t have the heart to cut off the interview; so I continued through the protocol. After conducting the interview, I noted in my journal that she was “too far removed from what I’m trying to look at”; therefore, I opted not to transcribe her thoughts. For the purposes and nature of my study, I used the data collected from the seven participants indicated in Table 3.1.

When participants agreed to an hour-long interview, I set up a place and time that best fit their locations and schedules. I worked with participants to select a quiet, neutral location, free from distractions (Creswell, 2007) within a nearby library so that participants did not need to travel far to interview. In all but one case, I interviewed participants in small study rooms within the same local public library. For the ease of one

participant, I traveled to a Midwest university to interview that participant within a study room in the university's library. Using library study rooms proved most conducive to interviewing: in my journal, I noted "The location/environment was suitable—much better than coffee shops," in which I had previously attempted several interviews during a smaller research project. Interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to 90 minutes, with the average interview length equaling 45 minutes.

At the start of each interview, participants reviewed and signed informed consent forms (see Appendix E). I also provided each participant with a \$10 Starbucks gift card and a copy of the interview protocol (see Appendix F), designed to elicit information on the impact of taking multiple AP courses during high school. I prepared the first version of the interview protocol (see Appendix F) when writing my research proposal, incorporating input from my dissertation committee. I utilized this first version with the first few participants; however, I also revised the protocol after an initial coding within the first three interview transcripts, field notes, the reflexive journal, and the first five written reflections.

Both interview protocols included semi-structured, open-ended questions that allowed participants freedom to interpret separate terms such as "challenges," "stresses," and "support structures" as well as to select particular memories and perceptions accordingly (see Appendices F & H). In both versions of the interview protocol, I gave participants the opportunity to add their thoughts and comments regarding anything on their mind in relation to taking multiple AP courses in high school, and many freely commented on a variety of topics. One participant, Jennifer, even took time to send a few

more thoughts via e-mail, with the preface, “After thinking about your questions a bit more and discussing things with my parents, I have a few more comments to add.”

During each interview, I also probed for more details and asked follow-up questions as needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and subsequently transcribed verbatim³⁷. At the end of the interviews and written reflections, participants were given the option to choose their own pseudonyms; Table 3.1 indicates those who did offer their own pseudonym. If participants did not designate a pseudonym at the end of their interview or within their written reflection, I assigned a pseudonym prior to transcription. I then correlated transcripts with corresponding field notes written immediately following each interview to add nuances of expression and non-verbal cues. I will further discuss the field note process in a later section.

Within the first couple days following each interview, I listened to each digital recording through once before beginning the transcription. Each recording was identified by pseudonym and stored in a password protected folder on my home computer, separate from transcribed interviews. All hard copies of the data were secured in locked file cabinet (see Appendix E). I transcribed the interview recordings of Jessica and of Heath. I started all other interview and focus group recordings in order to assign pseudonyms³⁸. Then I gave copies of the digital recordings saved to a flash drive to a single transcriptionist employed for the duration of this study. Once the transcriptionist completed each verbatim transcription, the copy of the corresponding digital recording was erased from the flash drive via a digital shredding program.

³⁷ A single transcriptionist was employed for all verbatim transcriptions, unless otherwise noted.

³⁸ Some participants selected their own pseudonyms; see Table 3.1.

As I interviewed the first 3 participants—Kevin Elias, Sophia, and John—I jotted down additional questions and clarifications in both my field notes and my reflexive journal that I could incorporate into a revised protocol. For example, after interviewing my first participant, Kevin Elias, I recorded in both my field notes and my reflexive journal the addition of a question: “Is there a difference between high-achieving and high-ability students in terms of taking AP courses?” My interview with Sophia raised two additional question possibilities: whether or not participants felt successful in their AP coursework and how the AP coursework helped students to transition to college. When interviewing John, he noted that I “didn’t ask about grades or anything like that”...and I “didn’t ask about performance in the AP class,” which reinforced my thoughts about adding a question regarding participants’ definitions of and perceptions of success while taking AP courses.

Following an initial coding of the first three interviews for emerging themes and after reviewing my field notes and reflexive journal, I revised the protocol for subsequent interviews (see Appendix G). The revisions reflected emerging themes in the first three interview transcripts as well as field notes and reflexive journaling. My reflexive journal allowed “self-reflection” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), which aided in revising questions to further explore and test themes in subsequent interviews and in the focus group (Jootun et al., 2009).

After much consideration, I added two questions: one to address how successful participants felt during high school and one to address the perceived differences between high-achieving and high-ability students (see Appendix F). I opted not to make changes to the written reflection protocol in order to maintain consistency (see Appendix H).

However, I did continue to include potential questions within my field notes and reflexive journaling in order to develop a focus group protocol following the development of preliminary themes. After Heath's interview, I made a particular note of three topics that he would find interesting for further research: "whether or not the Honors cohort³⁹ friendships would last long-term, how the chain of advice would change in the future, and the correlation between the multiple outside activities of AP students and the students' success."

Participants who sat for an interview received a \$10 Starbucks gift card for their assistance.

Written Reflections. As documented earlier, I collected written reflections from 17 participants—12 male and 5 female. This added level of data collection served to increase validity (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Johnson, 1999). Participants reviewed informed consent forms prior to submitting a written reflection via e-mail. Submission of a written reflection and a transcript of high school courses indicated informed consent (see Appendix G). The written reflections encouraged participants to reflect upon their experiences of taking four or more AP courses during two consecutive semesters. As I unpack later, many respondents cited having few other choices due to acceleration during their junior high and early high school years. Multiple participants also indicated that they took so many AP courses in order to stand out as college applicants.

Van Manen (1990) indicates that "Writing forces the person into a reflective attitude—in contrast to face-to-face conversation in which people are much more

³⁹ In Heath's high school, the Honors Cohort consisted of a group of students who had opted to pursue a rigorous course schedule, which required specific courses that included multiple concurrent AP courses.

immediately involved” (p. 64). Thus, the protocol questions encouraged thoughtful reflection of participants’ lived experiences. As in the interview protocol, I asked participants to describe themselves in order to use their own words and self-awareness to more accurately interpret and present their perceptions. The open-ended questions allowed participants to hone in on the aspects most important to them. For example, participants were asked about the challenges they faced as well as the stresses they faced during the time they took four or more AP courses at one time. These two ideas—challenges and stresses—were presented separately and could provide occasion for differing responses (see Appendix H). The ability to write their perceptions offered participants an opportunity to compose their thoughts in such a way as to tackle some of the more difficult emotional memories.

All participants who agreed to submit written reflections received a reflection protocol similar to the interview protocol (see Appendix H); however, they were free to digress from the questions provided. As with the interview protocol, I welcomed participants to provide additional thoughts or questions regarding the topic of taking four or more AP classes concurrently; however, unlike the interview participants, few written reflection participants opted to include additional thoughts. I sent the protocol and received responses via e-mail intermittently over a nine-month period, so I chose not to revise the written reflection protocol. As with interview participants, all participants submitting written reflections were asked their willingness to participate in a follow-up focus group, either live (see Appendix K) or written (see Appendix L).

The directions for the written reflections included a summary of Van Manen’s advice (1990) for lived-experience description: describing the experience as the

participants lived through it; describing the experience “from the inside...like a state of mind”; focusing on a singular example or incident, an example particularly vivid; recalling the specific feelings and sensory perceptions; and avoiding “fancy phrases or flowery terminology” (p. 64-65).

I removed or blackened all personal identifiers within the written reflections. I identified all electronic files by pseudonyms and stored each file in a password protected folder on my home computer. All hard copies of data were secured in a locked file cabinet in my home. Participants submitting written reflections received a \$5 Starbucks gift card for their assistance, and participants submitting focus group written reflections received a \$10 Starbucks gift card for their assistance.

Field notes and observations. To add greater depth to the data collection process, I wrote corresponding field notes and observations prior to and immediately following each interview and focus group to add nuances of expression and non-verbal cues. I was particularly conscious of the importance of immediacy in capturing the overall spirit of the interviews and focus groups: “Thankfully I **always** do my field notes right away—no exception. I would never be able to capture the nuances or the spirit of these experiences without this immediacy.” Field notes allow a researcher to note what she “hears, sees, experiences and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the process” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 13). Descriptive field notes provided an objective, detailed record, using concrete terms, of the participants, dialogue, setting, events, activities, and behaviors of all involved—including myself, as researcher—in the interview or focus group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Prior to my first interview, I began my field notes by recording what I already knew about the participant, Kevin Elias, whom I had met on an earlier occasion. I described Kevin Elias as “a unique individual...one who marches to his own drummer” as well as a “tell-it-like-it-is” individual, with a tendency to be “a bit taciturn” at times. I based my speculations on my recollections: “I knew him to be talkative when he was passionate about the topic but rather reticent when he did not care about the topic.” In this way, I continued to “bracket” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 47) my assumptions and prior knowledge. Furthermore, I made a conscious note to “make no mention of this knowledge during the interview, nor...allow it to affect my interpretation of his lived experience.”

In the field notes, I was also able to record appearance and mannerisms as well, so that I could provide a more accurate and thorough description of participants. After interviewing Jessica, a 20-year-old undergraduate attending a highly selective East Coast university, I jotted, “Jessica was dressed in jeans and a waffle-weave long-sleeve t-shirt (white) with a purple shirt over the top. She just returned from Japan a few days earlier and admitted to a bit of jet lag.” My notation of her admitted jet lag may help to explain the brevity of some of her responses.

This record of field notes and observations allowed me to correlate information with the transcribed interviews and focus group, thus creating further opportunity to interpret and analyze participants’ lived experiences through their reactions and nonverbal cues. While interviewing Jennifer, a 20-year-old who attended two different high schools, I noticed her relaxed attitude more so when speaking of one high school. In my field notes, I wrote,

In fact, whenever she mentions [the Midwest, urban regional academy], she looks more relaxed. Even though she received a diploma from [the large, Midwest, suburban high school], it seems that [the regional academy] played a more significant role in her life.

Throughout my field notes, I continued to document Jennifer's apparent comfort when speaking of the regional academy and her classmates there.

Field notes also served as a means of continual contemplation of how I might better understand participants' lived experiences. As previously mentioned, a notation in my field notes following an interview with Kevin Elias led to the insertion of a question that asked participants to differentiate high-achieving and high-ability students (see Appendix F). Also, as indicated earlier, when given an opportunity to freely add any thoughts to the interview, Sophia addressed the addition of a question concerning how AP courses might help students "transition to college," which I logged in the field notes. While reviewing my field notes following Jennifer's interview, I noticed that I again had indicated a desire "to insert a question about whether or not the participants think that their AP path impacted their college lives." After reflecting upon similar notations in multiple sets of field notes, I developed a related question for the focus group protocol (see Appendix K). Through both field notes and reflexive journaling, I was able to revise the interview protocol as well as develop the focus group protocol in order to obtain more substantive data.

In an attempt to capture the interview and focus group experiences more thoroughly, I included diagrams in my field notes for all interviews and focus groups to illustrate the room setup as well as the placement of the participants. These diagrams

allowed me to map any sort of movement or disruptions that may have occurred. Figure 3.2 provides an example of one such diagram.

To provide more thorough description in my focus group field notes, I also added pictures of the room arrangement for the focus group. This served two purposes: 1) it allowed me to record the placement of each person; and 2) it allowed me to set up the room similarly for both focus groups. Figure 3.4 provides an example of one such photo.

Figure 3.2. Diagram From Field Notes

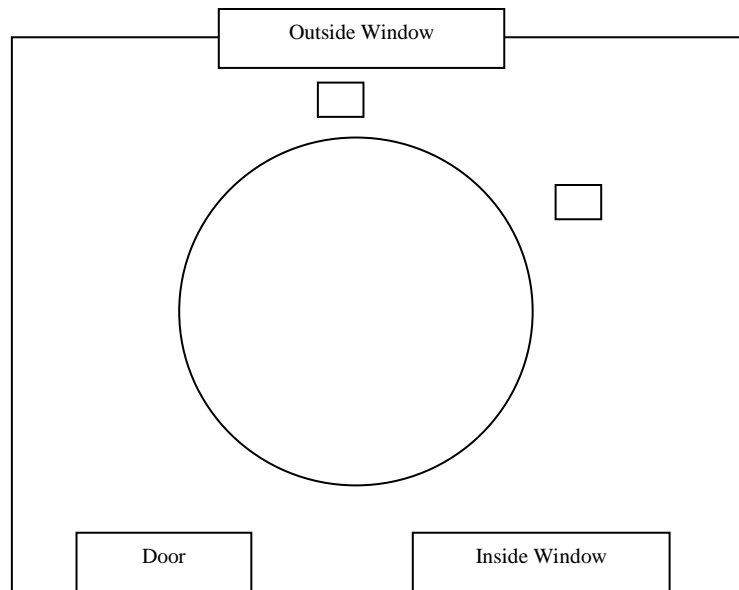


Figure 3.3. Photo From Field Notes



Reflective field notes functioned in conjunction with my reflexive journal to address speculative analysis, methods, ethical dilemmas and conflicts, as well as my own perspectives as researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Together, these field notes and observations permitted me to remember and to retain the gathered data. These two data collection methods also allowed me to refine the interview protocol and to develop the focus group protocol in order to gather rich and relevant feedback. The field notes and observations, combined with reflexivity, served to increase credibility and confirmability (Krefting, 1999) of the collected data.

Focus groups. As a final method of data collection, I assembled two follow-up focus groups (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2009) for a planned hour-long session, though both surpassed the timeframe by at least 20 minutes. Additionally, one individual offered his thoughts via written reflection, which served to complement the live focus group sessions. These focus groups provided further illumination of the phenomenon. The focus groups were assembled from those who indicated interest in a

follow-up focus group prior to participating in an initial interview or written reflection. Again, I gathered a convenience sample (Creswell, 2007; Henry, 1990) consisting of participants within reasonable driving distance of a neutral location, a local public library. When contacting those who agreed to a focus group, I selected a neutral, distraction-free, centralized study room in the nearby library. The location of the focus group did limit some individual's ability to participate; however, this location proved most suitable for the study.

The convenience sample represented relative homogeneity (Krueger & Casey, 2009) in age, in background, and/or in achievement. Granted, the age range was most varied—the oldest participant at age 30 and the youngest at age 18. However, the majority of participants fell between ages 19 and 22 (see Figure 3.1). All focus group participants attended high schools within semi-affluent communities, and all pursued post-secondary degrees. Seven of the eight focus group participants were currently enrolled in undergraduate or graduate programs; the oldest participant, Anne, was preparing to start a fellowship in neonatology.

After looking for salient categories and emerging themes by applying open coding strategies (Creswell, 2007) as well as code-recode procedures (Krefting, 1999) to both the interviews and written reflections (see Appendix M), I developed a semi-structured, open-ended (Krueger & Casey, 2009) focus group protocol (see Appendices K & L) that served to further explain and clarify emerging themes. Van Manen (1990) explains, "The methodology of phenomenology requires a dialectical going back and forth among these various levels of questioning" (p. 131). With this in mind, I wanted to encourage participants to share their lived experiences with each other as well as myself. Thus, I did

allow participants to digress from the protocol in so much as the information was relevant to understanding the phenomenon. I limited my participation in both focus groups only to ask protocol questions, to clarify questions, to probe for explication, and to redirect the groups when they digressed too far from the protocol.

The focus group was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim⁴⁰. Participants were assigned the same pseudonym used for the interview or written reflection. These pseudonyms were written on a name tent in front of each participant, and participants were asked to use pseudonyms when addressing each other. Furthermore, participants were asked not to share information outside of the focus group meeting.

As I did following each interview, I listened to the digital recording through once before beginning the transcription. Each focus group recording was identified as Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2, accordingly, and was stored in a password protected folder on my home computer, separate from transcribed interviews. All hard copies of the data were secured in locked file cabinet as reflected in the informed consent (see Appendix J). I transcribed the first 15 minutes of Focus Group 1 and the first 30 minutes of Focus Group 2 in order to assign pseudonyms and mask identifying information. I provided a speaking map⁴¹ for my transcriptionist of the complete recordings. Then I gave copies of the digital recordings saved to a flash drive to a single transcriptionist employed for the duration of this study. Once the transcriptionist completed each verbatim transcription, the copy of the corresponding digital recording was erased from the flash drive via a digital shredding program.

⁴⁰ A single transcriptionist was employed for all verbatim transcriptions, unless otherwise noted.

⁴¹ While listening to the audio recording, I kept track of each speaker (via pseudonym) so that the transcriptionist could easily follow along while transcribing.

In addition, I asked two participants to submit follow-up written reflections in response to a similar protocol posed during the focus group session—I removed any question which may have repeated information gathered during interviews and written reflections since these follow-up participants would not participate in a group setting (see Appendix L). I used the same general guidelines for written reflections as given to the initial participants who submitted written reflections. One individual submitted a follow-up written reflection via e-mail to summarized categories representing the questions in the focus group written reflection protocol (see Appendix L). All focus group participants received a \$10 Starbucks gift card for their assistance.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a recursive process, “a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 77). Through reflexive journaling, I constantly analyzed my involvement in the data collection and analysis process, making the entire process transparent, as mentioned earlier. In March 2011, I took stock of my total number of participants at that point as well as my desired total number:

I have collected 7 interviews and 12 written reflections for a total of 19. I’d like to get a little closer to the 26 participants I originally desired. With this in mind, I’m going to send one more round of invitations/reminders. I have at least 3 individuals who indicated willingness to participate via written reflection but have not yet submitted any written reflections.

The journal allowed me not only to keep track of the details about my data collection but also to make plans regarding the progression of my data collection.

Within my reflexive journal, I also created a “decision trail” (Jootun et al., 2009) through which I mapped the “choices made in the inclusion of participants and development of questions” for the interview phase as well as the focus group phase. Early in the data collection, I recorded:

I’m trying to maintain balance, but I’ve realized that I know many more males than females who fit the criteria...I think I may be seeking more reflections/interviews once I have names of individuals who did not graduate from [the same large, suburban, Midwest high school]. In terms of interviews, I hope to have at least one male and one female who did not graduate from [the aforementioned school]. This may increase the number of interviews, but that’s okay.

While I was unable to interview anyone who did not graduate from the same large, suburban, Midwest high school, it is important to note that I was conscientious of this issue and attempted to obtain varied viewpoints within the written reflections. I collected four written reflections from individuals who graduated from other high schools.

Another concern I encountered involved the three participants who did not meet the criteria. When determining whether or not to include interview data from a participant who had taken only two AP courses concurrently, I wrote that she was “too far removed from what I’m trying to look at.” However, after reviewing the transcript of Evan, a college freshman who submitted a written reflection even though he had officially taken only three AP courses in any one year, I jotted that “he took a semester of Advanced Economics and a semester of Advanced Political Culture, both of which could be considered AP courses—in fact, Advanced Political Culture is now called AP

Government.” Similarly, when Ralph wrote that he had only taken three AP courses during any one year, I reviewed his transcript and learned that he had taken Advanced Political Cultures as well. Both individuals offered unique comparative perspectives. Thus, after weighing the facts within my reflexive journal, I determined that data from both Evan and Ralph would be included in this study.

Another inherent concern in the process of data analysis involves the management of data. Juggling various forms of data collection requires significant organization at all levels of collection and analysis. Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) explain that the researcher must adopt a process designed “to present the reader with the stories identified throughout the analytical process, the salient themes, recurring language, and patterns of belief linking people and settings together” (p. 31). While no single consistent means of organizing data has emerged through phenomenological studies, Creswell (2007) identifies the general process as “preparing and organizing the data...for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (p. 148). Thus, developing methods of organizing data proved indispensable throughout the analysis and the presentation of data. Throughout data collection and analysis, I used Microsoft Excel® spreadsheets to track coding, to map emerging themes, and to organize descriptive data into the emerging themes.

Initial coding. Within the first couple days following each interview and focus group, I listened to each digital recording through once before beginning the transcription. As noted earlier, I transcribed the complete interviews with both Jessica and with Heath, and I transcribed the first few minutes of all other interviews as well as

both focus groups while each was fresh in my mind. Although I employed a transcriptionist throughout my data collection period for expediency, I did note in my journal the advantage of transcribing myself: “I sometimes write down ideas on sticky notes as I’m transcribing so that I can insert my ideas later during the more ‘official’ coding.”

While waiting for my transcriptionist to complete each transcription set, I listened to the digital audio recordings of each interview multiple times. In fact, I continued this practice of listening to digital audio recordings intermittently throughout the study. In particular, I regularly took walks in the mornings and evenings, prior to which I transferred the digital recording files from a password protected folder on my personal computer onto a portable mp3 player. It must be noted that I shredded the digital files from the mp3 player following each use using CCleaner⁴² in order to preserve the confidentiality of participants. This small step provided periods of uninterrupted time to listen to each interview and focus group recording. Even though I did not engage in coding during these times, listening to these recordings allowed me to “internalize[e] some of the participants’ comments” and to “make more significant connections” when I did code, as I noted in my reflexive journal. In this way, the participants’ words, whether in my hand or in my ear, continued to drive my research.

After receiving verbatim transcripts of the interviews from the transcriptionist, I read through each transcript several times, correlating information from the field notes as applicable and noting participants’ reactions and nonverbal cues. Similarly, I read through each written reflection multiple times to search for salient categories (Creswell,

⁴² For more information regarding CCleaner by Piriform, designed to protect privacy, visit <http://www.piriform.com/CCLEANER>.

2007). To increase validity and dependability, I triangulated multiple data sources in the initial coding phase (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

During the first read-through of all transcripts, field notes, and written reflections, I made no markings; rather, I focused on recording categories by hand in a small notebook. Though most of my data was coded and organized electronically, I carried this small notebook, with its elephant embellished cover, with me throughout my research journey so that I could record fragments of thoughts and descriptive data in a more immediate, and often more convenient, manner.

Within my reflexive journal, I explain that I conducted the “first read-through with little coding—basically, I use[d] this method to gather first impressions.” With the first three interview transcripts and field notes as well as the first five written reflections, I employed open coding strategies to look for salient categories (Creswell, 2007). For these interviews and written reflections, I created an initial coding table, as seen in Table 3.2, to map categories, which I subsequently applied to the remaining transcripts and written reflections. I then compared the categories to those I had written in my notebook in order to check for consistency and to clarify phrasing. In addition to coding categories, this phase also helped me to revise the interview protocol (see Appendix F).

During the second read-through of each data set, I used a series of highlight and font colors available on Microsoft Word® to code categories. This strategy helped me to make more sense of the participants’ experiences in two ways: first, I was able to see new ideas; second, I was able to reinforce trends noticed during the first coding phase. Table 3.2 illustrates the categories and markings used during this phase. As new categories emerged during the first round of coding transcripts, field notes, and written reflections, I

added to the list. The third time I read through each transcript, with field notes, and each written reflection, I again focused on each participant's overall perceptions and made additions or revisions to coding, using Microsoft Word® highlight and font colors. In addition to coding categories, this phase also helped me to revise the interview protocol (see Appendix F).

Throughout the data collection period, I continued to read through each transcript and field notes set as well as written reflection set once without marking, simply to situate myself into the participants' perceptions and to record additional categories that emerged in my small notebook and occasionally on sticky notes. In fact, my reflexive journal references this method multiple times: "I also write down ideas in my little elephant notebook and on sticky notes during the first read-through, which helps me to see through the participant's lens." This first read-through further allowed me to compare my thinking throughout the coding process. As I read through each data set a second time, the various highlight and font colors available on Microsoft Word® assisted me coding categories.

Through data triangulation of methods and sources, I constantly compared participants' perceptions in order to increase credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Krefting, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Constant comparison (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) of transcriptions, field notes, written reflections and reflexive journaling enabled me to see the experiences through the participants' lenses and to recognize similarities and differences among the experiences. Another method of improving dependability evolved through a detailed description of

research methods recorded in both field notes and reflexive journaling as well as through a code-recode procedure.

Recoding. Krefting (1999) suggests a code-recode procedure to ensure dependability. After initial coding of the first three interview transcripts and field notes as well as the first five written reflections, I set aside these data sets for at least two weeks, as suggested (Krefting, 1999, p. 180). This lapse of time between initial coding and first recoding phases allowed me to engage in the process of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994), which lays out all data for examination and treats each data as having equal weight. Through horizontalization, “there is an interweaving of person, conscious experience, and phenomenon...qualities are recognized and described; every perception is granted equal value, nonrepetitive constituents of the experience are linked thematically, and a full description is derived” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96).

Approaching the data with fresh eyes during this recoding phase, I again applied open coding strategies to clean copies of the three interview transcripts and field notes and of the five written reflections, using various colors of highlight markers and an array of patterns to code salient categories. Similar to the first round, I read through each transcript and field notes set and written reflection set again to make additions or revisions to recoding with highlight markers and patterns. Table 3.2 compares the categories and markings used during each coding phase.

Throughout the remainder of the data collection period, I applied the code-recode procedure to the interview transcripts and field notes as well as written reflections as each was collected, waiting at least ten days before recoding each data set. By combing through and labeling the data repeatedly and continuously throughout the data collection

period, I was able to consider multiple meanings. I continually compared transcripts to field notes and observations, as well, further clarifying emerging themes.

During each coding phase, I looked for emerging horizons and themes that focused and simplified the data as a whole, with a desire to make sense of the particular phenomenon through “insightful invention, discovery, disclosure” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 88). In other words, as Van Manen (1990) explains, theme not only captures the notion of the phenomenon but also “gives shape to the shapeless,” “describes the content of the notion,” and reduces the notion to an understandable meaning (p. 88). In the same notebook that I recorded initial categories by hand, I also began to record initial horizons (Moustakas, 1994) that I noticed during the recode phase. Writing the word “Participants” at the top of the page compelled me to focus my phrasing on the thoughts and feelings of the participants, incorporating their wording when possible. As I continued to recode data sets, I added to my handwritten list. These horizons were subsequently clustered into key themes.

Comparison of data from interviews, field notes and observations, written reflections, and reflexive journaling led to the identification of common themes. In March 2011, prior to receiving and coding the final four written reflections, I created a table of 25 initial “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61) based off my handwritten notes as well as the aforementioned coding categories, or horizons, which can be seen in Table 3.3. In addition to identifying horizons, this stage of analysis also helped me to create the focus group protocol (see Appendices K & L).

Table 3.2. Coding—Rounds One and Two.

Coding: Round One—Microsoft Word®	Coding: Round Two—Highlight Markers
= coping strategies	Blue backslash = pressure/expectations
Blue = inner stress	Blue squiggle = friendship
Blue highlight = sleep issues	Blue underscore = sacrifice
Blue highlight w/pink font = extracurricular activities (school related)	Green = goals while taking AP
Blue highlight w/yellow font = homework (general)	Green backslash = future considerations
Brick = burn-out	Green circles = time management
Brick highlight w/green font = good grades	Green squiggle = preparation for college
Brick highlight w/yellow font = self-described personality	Light blue = motivation to take AP
Brown = regrets	Light blue backslash = high-achieving v. high-ability
Dark blue = friendship	Light blue squiggle = falling grades
Dark blue highlight w/pink font = extracurricular activities (non-school related)	Light purple = self-described personality
Dark blue highlight w/yellow font = common intellectual bonds	Light purple backslash = pleasure from busyness
Dark green highlight = sacrifices	Light purple squiggle = preparation for the future
Dark green highlight w/light blue font = impression of others not in AP courses	Orange = stress caused by AP coursework/advanced coursework
Dark green highlight w/yellow font = attitude of not being good enough	Orange squiggle = general stress
Green = homework stress/academic stress	Pink = challenges caused by AP
Green highlight = academic performance goal	Pink circle = desired the challenge of advanced coursework
Green highlight w/ red font = motivation for AP	Pink squiggle = coping strategies/mechanisms
Grey highlight = stress (general)	Purple = academic support
Grey highlight w/red font = stress related to finals and/or AP exams	Purple squiggle = common intellectual bonds/shared intellectual experiences
Orange font = perceived benefit of multiple AP courses	Red backslash = burnout
Pink highlight = rushed feelings	Red circle = duty
Pink highlight w/blue font = trying too hard; trying to “out-do” someone else	Red squiggle = stress from outside sources
Purple = time management	Red underscore = parent influence
Purple highlight = “I can’t do it” mentality	Salmon = stress from homework
Purple highlight w/pink font = success	Salmon squiggle = sleep deprivation
Purple highlight w/yellow font = negativity towards pullout g/t programming	Turquoise = tests
Red = stress from outside influences	Violet backslash = perceived impact of AP
Red highlight = future considerations	Violet squiggle = emotional support

Table 3.2. Coding—Rounds One and Two (cont.)

Coding: Round One—Microsoft Word®	Coding: Round Two—Highlight Markers
Teal highlight = love of learning	Yellow = homework load
Teal highlight w/red font = appeal of dual credit options	Yellow squiggle = importance of grades/high grades
Teal highlight w/yellow font = preparation for college	
Turquoise highlight = parent influence	
Yellow highlight = challenge	
Yellow highlight w/blue font = underachievement	
Yellow highlight w/red font = hard work	

Pruning. Before data were completely collected, I began to prune the aforementioned horizons, using a constant comparative method (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Conrad, 1978), which allowed me to identify emerging themes and constantly compare these themes with the code-recode categories as I continued to narrow the focus to key themes. The visual comparison of the code-recode tables permitted me to analyze the categories more effectively (see Table 3.2). The horizontalization continued throughout the code-recode phase and into the pruning phase, with the constant goal of capturing the “meanings and essences of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 119). Throughout the data analysis, I continued to practice reflexivity in order to clarify my own thinking and interpretations. As I looked for emerging themes, I kept in mind that the “*universal or essential quality of a theme...is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is*” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 107, emphasis in original). This inductive strategy helped me to reduce the preliminary categories to primary themes and to create semi-structured interview protocol for the focus group in order to glean

pertinent data for the identified themes. Tables 3.4 and 3.5 illustrate the pruning process, reducing 25 initial horizons to 16.

As I continued reading through the data, I began to glean “anecdotes” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 119) and to generalize consistencies in the data, eventually isolating several emerging themes. After coding and recoding all interview transcripts, field notes, and written reflections multiple times, I developed an open-ended focus group protocol based on the emerging themes in order to gather more data to add richness and depth to understanding the phenomenon of taking four or more AP courses concurrently. The follow-up focus group was designed to “allow a rigorous interrogation of the phenomenon as identified at first and then cast in the reformulation of a question” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 131).

Table 3.3. Horizons—First Iteration.

Horizons—first iteration.
Participants took AP courses for the challenge
Participants often noted a love of learning
Participants often mentioned college readiness as a primary motivation for taking AP courses
Participants took AP courses for the perceived future benefits
Participants generally felt that AP courses prepared them well for future academic endeavors
Participants felt that taking 4+ AP courses limited and defined their social lives
Participants shared common intellectual bonds and experiences with others taking AP courses
Participants developed friendships within AP courses due to common experiences
Participants often looked to friends for emotional support
Participants were often active in multiple extracurricular activities
Participants often mentioned gaining satisfaction through busyness
Participants experienced high stress, in general, at times
Participants often experienced stress caused by high levels of homework and AP test preparation
Participants often made sacrifices, both forced and self-selected
Participants noted support from parents/family but also additional stress caused by parents/family
Participants sometimes noted additional emotional stress from nonrelated factors that contributed to academic performance
Participants set high academic performance goals, both GPA and test scores
Participants often struggled with time management
Participants often experienced sleep deprivation
Participants often struggled to find balance in their lives
Participants often developed both healthy and unhealthy coping strategies on their own
Participants measure personal success by both performance and inner satisfaction
Participants consider themselves successful in retrospect
Participants have few regrets in retrospect
Participants often recommend the same academic path for like-minded individuals

Table 3.4. Common Themes—Second Iteration.

Common themes—second iteration, May 2011
Participants took AP courses for the academic challenge and stimulation
Participants mentioned college readiness as a primary motivation for taking AP courses
Participants felt that AP courses prepared them well for future academic endeavors
Participants felt that taking 4+ AP courses limited and defined their social lives
Participants shared common intellectual bonds and experiences with others taking AP courses
Participants gleaned emotional support from friendships developed within the network of AP courses
Participants noted that involvement in extracurricular activities contributed both stress and satisfaction to their lives
Participants made sacrifices, both forced and self-selected
Participants set high academic performance goals, both GPA and test scores
Participants experienced increased stress caused by high levels of homework and AP test preparation
Participants noted support from parents/family but also additional stress caused by parents/family
Participants noted stress from nonacademic factors that contributed to academic performance
Participants struggled with time management that often led to sleep deprivation
Participants developed both healthy and unhealthy coping strategies on their own
Participants struggled to find balance in their lives
Participants held few regrets in retrospect

After a first round coding of focus group one, I began to examine the second iteration of horizons more closely, with the goal of pruning further and clustering to reach the essences or core themes of the participants' experiences—by no means an easy task. While engaged in the pruning and clustering process, I constantly reminded myself of the need to present the lived experiences with integrity. In my journal, I wrote: "The pruning process is a bit tedious, particularly because I want to capture the lived experiences of the participants with as much accuracy and fidelity as possible." My reflexive journal contained multiple listings of themes and variations as I culled through the data and mulled over how to best "capture the participants' lived experiences."

From the first two iterations of horizons, or “the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97), I began to cluster the horizons into themes. After close examination of both data and theme iterations, I began to isolate “the unique qualities” or horizons of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 129), which I recorded in my reflexive journal. Later, I gleaned 27 significant horizons from the first two iterations when finalizing the key themes. Table 3.5 contains two excerpts from my reflexive journal—an early version and a later version of themes developed from horizons—to show the evolution of themes. The ability to continuously visualize and maneuver themes allowed me to better understand the participants’ experiences.

Once I settled on nine key themes that best represent the participants’ lived experiences, I developed a Microsoft Excel® spreadsheet to sort data. With the nine themes along the top row and participants’ names in the left column, I sorted comments from transcripts and written reflections into relevant columns. Appendix M provides a screen shot view of this step. I continued to review transcripts and written reflections until I reached a point of saturation (Creswell, 2007), and found no new information within the collected data that would add to my understanding of the emergent themes. The five iterations of both horizons and themes reveal the ongoing nature of data analysis (see Appendix N). The third iteration presents nine key themes with 25 invariant horizons (Moustakas, 1994).

At this point of data saturation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), I began to interpret the data, develop findings, and reach conclusions based upon the key themes. I also created a diagram to visualize the experiences that make up the phenomenon. However, this third

iteration further evolved as I interpreted and reported findings. I discovered some unnecessary repetition among horizons and themes. The most significant change involved the elimination of the category “Primary struggles attributed to course load” (see Appendix N). I had clustered three horizons under this category—homework load, time management, and sleep deprivation—all of which were addressed in other categories. The final iteration contains 25 horizons clustered into eight key themes.

Member checking. To increase the trustworthiness of my results and interpretations (Krefting, 1999), I asked all participants to review my interpretations and to add their thoughts. Twelve participants requested to review my preliminary analysis. I sent an electronic version to each of these participants. Only five of these participants provided any thought beyond variations of, “Looks great!” and “Good luck!” Abby, Anne, Dee, and Heath provided some clarifying details. In her e-mail response, Anne admitted that she wanted to read the document “mostly just to see what everyone had said” and that she appreciated “someone taking the time to try and understand this subset of students.” Kevin Elias provided reassurance that my analysis of the participants’ lived experiences does capture the essence of the phenomenon. He wrote,

I can't say I'm surprised at your conclusions, but I am surprised at how many people I agree with in your paper. I thought that there'd be a few people that I would find completely nuts, but they all seem to have shared the same experience.

Through this variation of member checking (Krefting, 1999), I was able to retain fidelity to the participants’ stories while interpreting their ideas through my own lens (Borland, 1991).

Table 3.5. Evolution of Themes

Key Themes 6/14/11
Participants mention several primary motivations for taking 4+ AP courses—college preparedness, challenge, and lack of choices
Participants name both academic and nonacademic sources of stress while taking 4+ AP courses
Participants noted that involvement in extracurricular activities contributed both stress and satisfaction to their lives
Participants made sacrifices, both forced and self-selected
Participants struggled with time management that often led to sleep deprivation
Participants gleaned emotional support from friendships developed within the network of AP courses
Participants developed both healthy and unhealthy coping strategies on their own
Participants held few regrets in retrospect

Key Themes—6/21/11
Motivations: Participants mentioned college preparedness, college applications, and challenge as primary motivations for taking 4+ AP courses
Stress: Participants mentioned stress derived from both academic and nonacademic sources during the time they took 4+ AP courses
Extracurricular involvement: Most participants were involved in extracurricular activities, which added both satisfaction and stress to their lives during the time they took 4+ AP courses
Sacrifices: Participants made sacrifices, both forced and self-selected, during the time they took 4+ AP courses
Struggles: Participants struggled with time management that often led to sleep deprivation during the time they took 4+ AP courses
Friendships: Participants gleaned emotional support from friendships developed within the network of AP courses
Coping Strategies: Participants developed both healthy and unhealthy coping strategies on their own
Balance: Participants had mixed feelings on whether or not balanced was achieved or even needed
Regrets: Participants held few regrets in retrospect

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the rigor and relevance of any research study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four criterion of “trustworthiness”: (a) truth value, (b) applicability, (c) consistency, and (d) neutrality (p. 290). Furthermore, the authors

identified four corresponding strategies to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative studies: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Krefting, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With these elements in mind, I carefully designed data collection and data analysis methods to increase the rigor and relevance, or trustworthiness, of this study.

Establishing credibility ensures that the findings are realistic and reliable and that the findings accurately represent the participants' lived experiences. Reflexivity (Krefting, 1999; Van Manen, 1990), proved fundamental to establishing credibility throughout this study. By keeping a reflexive journal throughout the research process, I constantly and consistently recorded my own thoughts, feelings, perceptions, biases, interpretations, and analyses. The triangulation of data collection and analysis (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Krefting, 1999; Johnson, 1999) also contributed to credibility. I established five data collection points: reflexive journaling, individual interviews, field notes and observations, written reflections, and follow-up focus groups. Additionally, data analysis included initial coding, recoding, and pruning of data to establish horizons and key themes. Furthermore, consistent interview techniques (Krefting, 1999) assured that participants were presented with consistent locations (Creswell, 2007) and semi-structured, open ended protocols (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Member checking (Borland, 1991; Krefting, 1999) allowed me to make sure that I had captured the essence of participants' lived experiences both accurately and justly.

The transferability of this research occurs as the reader examines the analysis for its situational uniqueness and applicability to specific circumstances. As readers review and understand this phenomenological study, they must consider my distinct

characteristics and perceptions as the researcher and of the participants, which ultimately affects the readers' evaluation of the results. Dense descriptions of the participants' perceptions include numerous excerpts from verbatim transcripts, from field notes, from written reflections, and from my own reflexive notes.

In addition to dense descriptions of collected data, I included dense descriptions of research methods (Krefting, 1999) in order to establish dependability, or consistency, of findings. As a component of the research methods employed in this study, I engaged in triangulation of data collection methods so that any weakness inherent in one method might be offset by the use of alternate methods (Krefting, 1999). I also applied a code-recode procedure (Krefting, 1999) that allowed me to comb through data repeatedly and continuously throughout the data collection and analysis period. The constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007) inherent in both triangulation and the code-recode procedure further established dependability throughout the study.

Triangulation and reflexivity, both previously addressed, also added to the confirmability of the data, the findings, and the interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For each key theme, I provided documentation from multiple sources supports, ensuring that the data support my findings and interpretations. Moreover, in my reflexive journal, I kept a "decision trail" (Jootun et al., 2009) which mapped the research journey, from research design to data collection to data analysis.

The phenomenological method has allowed me to approach understanding through lived experiences both of participants and of myself as researcher, interpreting my own reactions as well as the reactions of others, knowing that what is true for me or

for participants may not be true for the next person who walks through the door. This study presents information that holds true to my interpretations of both participants' perspectives and my own perspective, not only as a research but also as a high school teacher. The results of this study may encourage AP teachers, high school counselors and school personnel, as well as high school administrators to take into account how students negotiate taking four or more AP courses concurrently. In the future, gifted literature and AP literature will benefit from further study into the lived experiences of students who take multiple AP courses in a variety of settings.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations of this study include researcher bias, the effect of familiarity between participants and researcher, and the role of perception and memory to recreate lived experiences. Through careful data collection and analysis, this study contains thick descriptions of the participants' lived experiences while taking four or more AP courses concurrently during an academic year. As the researcher, I was consistently aware that my own experiences with students in my AP classroom could affect the ways in which I perceived the data; however, I engaged in constant bracketing of my own bias through reflexive journaling, and I consistently reported this potential for bias throughout the study. As noted earlier, 15 of the 24 participants had once been students in my classroom. With this in mind, I made every attempt to encourage open and honest communication, mirroring my own classroom philosophy and atmosphere. Thus, as I gathered data, I assumed that participants offered candid, sincere responses to questions posed. I understand that my presence may have, in some cases, altered normal behavior and responses to a degree; however, triangulated data should minimize the impact of this

occurrence. The goal of this study is to understand the lived experiences of the participants through their own lenses; therefore, their recollections and their perceptions provide the rich data that leads to greater understanding.

Delimitations of this study concern the boundaries set to recruit participants, the individuals to be studied, and the setting of the study. While initial boundaries suggested a balance of male and female participants, the nature of data collection—convenience sampling and snowball sampling—led to more male involvement than female, with 16 males and 8 females. With the exception of one participant⁴³, this study was delimited to individuals in the Midwest who attended large, suburban high schools or regional academies that offered numerous⁴⁴ AP courses. In addition, 22 of the participants are currently pursuing undergraduate or graduate studies. The thick description presented should enable students who pursue a similar educational path in high school to recognize something of themselves in the stories that follow.

⁴³ One participant obtained through recommendation attended a large, suburban high school in the East.

⁴⁴ All high schools represented in this study offer at least 15 AP courses.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

Overview

Through this phenomenological study, I hoped to better understand how high school students are impacted by taking multiple AP courses, particularly four or more, during at least one academic year. Increasing competition for college admission coupled with the promise of earning college credit through AP coursework has resulted in increased enrollment in AP courses during the past ten years (College Board, *7th annual report to the nation*, 2011). As a result, more students, both high-ability and high-achieving, are taking multiple AP courses concurrently. Specifically, more high-achieving students undertake the challenge of taking four or more AP courses concurrently. While research supports the benefits of AP coursework for students (Hargrove, Godin, and Dodd, 2008), this research gives little insight into students' lived experiences when they enrolled in multiple AP courses. Without insight into the experiences and perceptions of high school students who fill their schedules with AP coursework, high schools may be underprepared to meet the social-emotional needs of these high-achieving students.

A single, overarching question drove this study: How did taking four or more AP courses impact a high school student's life? Through my position as a high school AP English teacher, I have worked with many high-ability and high-achieving students. Time and again, these students have proven themselves to be both highly driven and highly stressed. Their drive excites me; their stress worries me. I designed this study to help me see and understand the impact that taking multiple AP courses concurrently may have on

students' lives. I listened to the stories of individuals who enrolled in four or more AP courses. All were eager to share their stories. After listening to and analyzing the lived experiences of these driven individuals who enrolled in multiple AP courses while in high school, I have highlighted their stories to provide readers with insight into their experiences and perceptions.

The candor, sincerity, interest, and passion participants expressed while telling their stories reveal their desire and their need for others to hear what they have to say. Their stories may help teachers and administrators better serve future students who fill their schedules with AP coursework. Jake, an 18-year-old freshman at an Upper Midwest University, wrote: "I'm glad you are bringing light to the 'AP Life' and you are looking into the effects of AP courses on high school students." Another participant, Jane, a self-described "perfectionist" and "procrastinator" who attended two different high schools, surprised me by sending additional comments after "thinking about [the] questions a bit more and discussing things with [her] parents." The individuals who volunteered their time and recollections to this study seemed to appreciate the opportunity to share their thoughts and perceptions.

As noted earlier, criteria for the study limited participation to individuals who had taken four or more AP courses during two consecutive semesters during their high school careers. Though I initially intended to reject all data from participants not meeting the specified criteria, and even turned down a couple early offers from individuals who expressed their interest but who had only taken two or three AP courses concurrently, I made exceptions for two participants who offered to submit written reflections. Evan, a

member of the Honors Diploma program⁴⁵ in his suburban Midwest high school, enrolled in three AP courses concurrently and added an additional AP-level course⁴⁶ each semester during his senior year. Ralph, who attended the same high school as Evan several years earlier when the Honors Diploma did not exist, also enrolled in three AP courses concurrently and added an additional AP-level course for one semester during his senior year. Both Evan and Ralph had completed most of their written reflections before realizing themselves that they did not meet the criteria as specified, yet both expressed eagerness to share their thoughts and experiences regardless of whether I could use the data. My own familiarity with the curriculum in their Midwest, suburban high school allowed me to determine that their coursework reflected the same rigor as four College Board approved AP courses. Knowing this, I opted to collect and include their perceptions.

The 24 participants represent a range of enrollment in concurrent AP courses, from three courses⁴⁷ to six courses during an academic year. Enrollment in multiple AP courses occurred primarily during the participants' senior year, with 18 individuals fitting the participant criteria with their coursework during their senior year. Two of these 18 participants also enrolled in four or more during their junior year. Eight individuals enrolled in four or more courses during their junior year. Course enrollment was self-reported and verified through participants' academic transcripts. Table 4.1 provides a break-down of participants' coursework.

⁴⁵ Described earlier, students identified for the Honors Diploma program successfully complete 62 credits, maintain a 3.5 GPA, and present a senior exhibition in order to be awarded an Honors Designation on their diploma at graduation.

⁴⁶ The AP-level courses mentioned are not official, College Board approved AP courses; however, upon completion, students are prepared for the corresponding AP subject exam.

⁴⁷ Please note aforesaid rationale for exceptions to established criteria.

Table 4.1. Participants and Coursework.

Participant	Interview/ Written Reflection/ Focus Group	Specific AP Courses & Year Taken
Aaron	Written Reflection & Focus Group	Senior: AP Calculus BC, AP French, AP Language & Composition, AP Physics, AP Statistics
Abby	Written Reflection	Senior: AP French, AP Microeconomics (one semester), AP Psychology (one semester), AP Government (one semester), AP Calculus BC, AP American History
Anne	Written Reflection & Focus Group	Senior: AP Biology, AP European History, AP French, AP Calculus BC
Dave Gretson	Written Reflection	Junior: AP Biology, AP Calculus BC, AP European History, AP Literature & Composition; Senior: AP Chemistry, AP French, AP Language & Composition, AP Physics, AP United States History
Dee	Written Reflection & Focus Group	Senior: AP Calculus BC, AP Language & Composition, AP Physics, AP Spanish Language
Elliott	Written Reflection	Senior: AP Calculus BC, AP Literature & Composition, AP Physics, AP United States History
Evan	Written Reflection	Senior: AP Calculus BC, AP Language & Composition, AP Physics, *American Political Culture (one semester course), *Advanced Economics (one semester course) *NOTE: These two courses are taught at an AP level & students can opt to take the AP exam for these courses.
Heath	Interview	Senior: AP Calculus BC, AP Language & Composition, AP Physics, AP Spanish Language; AP Macro-Economics (one semester course)
Jake	Written Reflection	Junior: AP Calculus BC, AP Chemistry, AP Language & Composition, AP Spanish 5
James Franco	Written Reflection	Junior: AP Chemistry, AP Micro-Economics (one semester course), AP Macro-Economics (one semester course), AP Physics, AP Spanish Language
Jane	Written Reflection	Senior: AP Calculus BC, AP French, AP Physics, AP Literature & Composition
Jennifer	Interview	Junior: AP Biology, AP Calculus BC, AP Language & Composition, AP United States History
Jessica	Interview	Junior: AP Biology, AP Calculus BC, AP Language & Composition, AP Physics, AP United States History
Jimmy Diesel	Written Reflection	Senior: AP Problems & Statistics, AP Environmental Science, AP Comparative Government, AP Spanish V

Table 4.1. Participants and Coursework (cont).

Participant	Interview/ Written Reflection/ Focus Group	Specific AP Courses & Year Taken
John	Interview & Focus Group	Senior: AP Biology, AP Calculus BC, AP Language & Composition, AP Physics, AP United States History
Kevin Elias	Interview	Senior: AP Biology, AP Chemistry, AP Language & Composition, AP Literature & Composition, AP Physics, AP United States History (also took the AP Government exam)
Marcus	Written Reflection	Junior: AP Biology, AP Calculus AB, AP Language & Composition, AP United States History; Senior: AP Calculus BC, AP Literature & Composition, AP United States Government (one semester course), AP Macro-Economics (one semester course), AP Physics B
Michael	Written Reflection	Senior: AP Calculus BC, AP Language & Composition, AP Physics, AP Spanish Language
Ralph	Written Reflection	Senior: AP Literature & Composition, AP United States History, AP Spanish V, *American Political Culture (one semester course) *NOTE: This course is taught at an AP level & students can opt to take the AP exam for this course.
Rex	Written Reflection & Focus Group	Junior: AP Micro-Economics (one semester course), AP Macro-Economics (one semester course), AP Calculus BC, AP Chemistry, AP European History, AP Language & Composition
Ronald	Interview & focus Group	Senior: AP Calculus BC, AP Language & Composition, AP Physics, AP Spanish Language
Sam	Written Reflection	Senior: AP Calculus BC, AP Language & Composition, AP Physics, AP United States History
Shriya	Written Reflection & Focus Group	Junior: AP Biology, AP Chemistry, AP European History, AP Literature & Composition
Sophia	Interview & Focus Group	Senior: AP Calculus BC, AP Literature & Composition, AP Spanish Language, AP United States History

Among participants, Kevin Elias topped the chart, enrolling in six AP courses during both semesters of his senior year. Also, since he enrolled in American Political Cultures, the aforementioned AP-level course, Kevin Elias opted to take seven AP examinations in May. He described himself as “a strange mix between a nerd and a

jock...in the hipster range...[and] kind of easy-going,” which may help to explain his reasoning for taking seven AP examinations. Kevin Elias justified that after his teacher declared the “test was pretty easy to do as long as you paid attention in Government⁴⁸ and you did a little bit of extra studying,” he decided to take the AP examination: “what the heck, it’s another AP class; I can get credit for it, so I might as well.”

Five participants enrolled in five AP courses concurrently during one of their high school years, and two participants enrolled in a fifth AP course during one semester of their senior year. Heath, an interview participant who revealed that he tries “to stretch [himself] when he can but not too thin,” took a fifth AP course online during one semester of his senior year, as did Abby. Fourteen participants enrolled in a maximum of four AP courses during an academic year. As mentioned earlier, two individuals were enrolled in a maximum of three AP courses, both during their senior year; however, both added at least one additional AP-level course during that same year.. Though four participants—Aaron, Evan, Heath, Michael, and Ronald—asserted that they were required to take specified AP courses as part of a program such as the Honors Diploma mentioned earlier, other participants chose their AP coursework according to individual goals and aspirations.

While listening to and reading the participants’ explanations of why they pursued a rigorous academic schedule during high school, I began to see the phenomenon through their lenses. In fact, their motivations for taking four or more AP courses became one of the themes that I first identified to best highlight the participants’ experiences. After careful analysis of participants’ experiences, I clustered 25 significant horizons into eight

⁴⁸ This is a referenced American Political Cultures, an AP-level course after which many students took the AP Government exam.

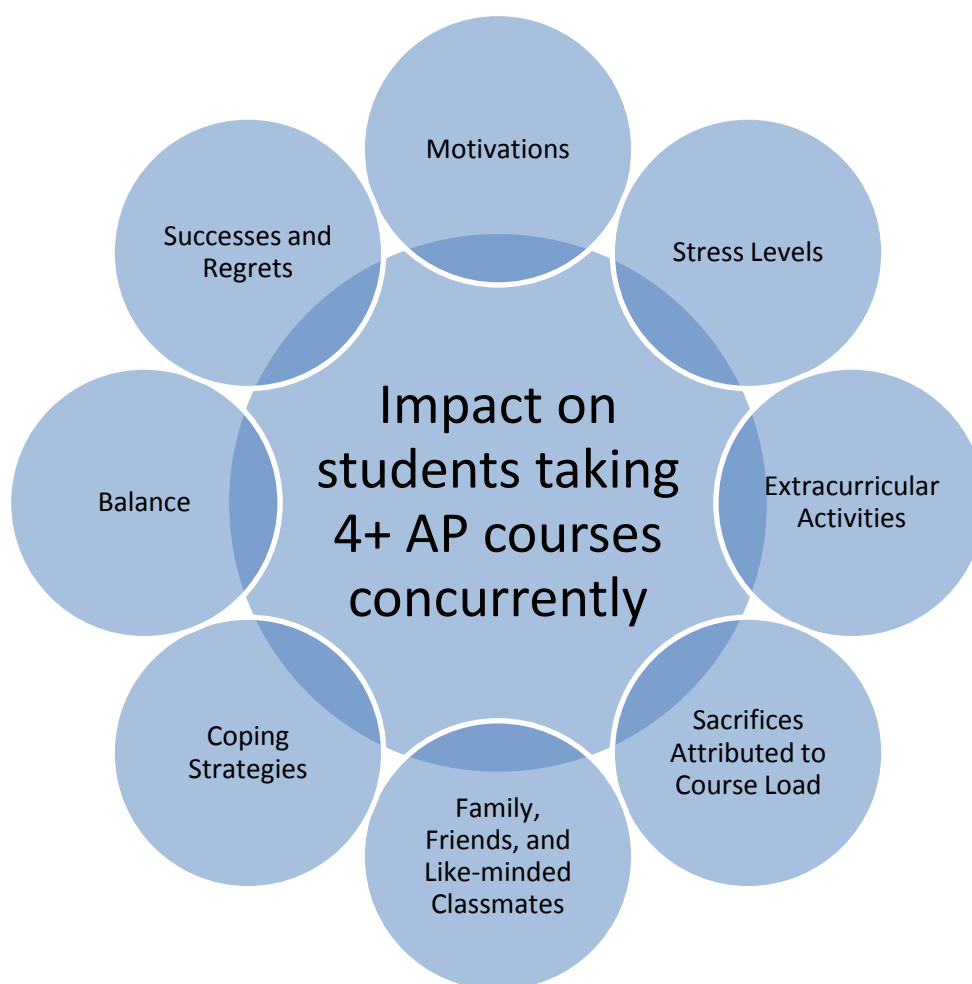
key themes that capture the essence of participants' lived experiences while taking four or more AP courses concurrently. Table 4.2 delineates these themes and horizons.

Table 4.2. Key Themes

Key Themes—final iteration, July 2011
<p>Motivations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancement of college application résumés • Preparedness for college/gain college credit • Academic challenge and enjoyment • Natural progression/lack of other choices
<p>Stress Levels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework load and test preparation • Future considerations • Parent/family • Extraneous stressors
<p>Extracurricular activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time commitment and constraint • Benefits • Impact on academics
<p>Sacrifices attributed to course load:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time with friends and family • Activities and interests • Health and happiness
<p>Family, friends, and like-minded classmates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duality of parent/family support • Social/academic support among peers • Competition among peers
<p>Coping strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People • Healthy habits • Unhealthy habits
<p>Balance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions of balance • Experiences • Retrospective views
<p>Successes and regrets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions of success • Perceived benefits, short-term and long-term • Hindsight, wishes, and regret • Advice for AP programming and future students

Furthermore, to assist readers, I created a visual that represented the themes as they contribute to the understanding of the overall phenomenon. Generating an appropriate visual took quite some time; rather, determining an overall image that would capture the themes without suggestion that any one theme may be more important than another took quite some time. After perusing various designs, I determined that a radial venn diagram, as seen in Figure 4.1, best illustrates the amalgamation of themes that composes the phenomenon.

Figure 4.1. Impact on Students Taking 4+ AP Courses Concurrently



In order to gain insight into the lived experiences of those who take multiple AP courses concurrently during an academic year, I first conducted interviews and gathered written reflections. After continuously coding and recoding these data, I began to identify common horizons. I used the second iteration of horizons to help finalize the question protocol used for two focus group sessions. The coding and recoding process recommenced with the focus group transcripts, as well as continued with interview transcripts and written reflections. I pruned horizons then clustered to identify nine key themes, which I revised further as I analyzed and interpreted the data. The fifth and final iteration of themes contains 25 horizons clustered into eight themes. Table 4.2 and Figure 4.1 demonstrate the themes. In subsequent sections of chapter four, I introduce each theme and unpack its horizons.

Motivations

I first explored why these individuals enrolled in the rigorous coursework. When addressing why students chose to enroll in so many AP courses, thoughts of college played a significant role. The majority of participants indicated that their motivations were heavily influenced by the college admission process as well as improving their preparedness for collegiate study. The College Board itself advertises that AP programming provides students with “confidence to tackle the academic challenges” presented in college, with AP credits that allow students “time to move into upper-level courses...pursue a double major, or study or travel abroad,” and with “greater academic success in college than similar students who did not participate in AP” (College Board, *Bulletin for AP students and parents: 2010-11*, 2010, p. 4).

The appeal of academic challenge and enjoyment also ranked high among motivators for taking multiple AP courses. When Dee registered for classes, she “did want to have a typical easy senior year.” Rather, she “wanted to learn something useful.” Jessica had similar thoughts, emphasizing, “I really do love to learn.” Almost half of the participants indicated that AP coursework was the next logical step during their high school careers. Most participants viewed AP coursework as the only option for serious, college-bound students. Some participants were part of an Honors Program that required the AP courses; while other participants registered for the next level up in a subject, often the AP course.

The interview, written reflection, and focus group protocols asked participants to talk about their motivations and their goals for taking four or more AP courses concurrently (see Appendices F, H, K, & L). Four horizons characterize their motivations: (a) enhancement of college application résumés, (b) preparedness for college/college credit, (c) academic challenge and enjoyment, and (d) natural progression/lack of other choices.

Enhancement of college application résumés. Seventeen participants indicated that they took so many AP courses in order to stand out as college applicants. Jake, a 19-year-old undergraduate from a suburban high school in the East, was a little more forthright in stating his goals, though his sentiments threaded evenly throughout the participants’ responses: “I took them [AP courses] purely because it went on my transcript as AP. It was the most competitive schedule I could take and I thought it would make me the best possible candidate for college.” When asked about her motivations for taking multiple AP courses, Sophia candidly replied:

I was kind of in a corner because if I had a transcript sent off to a college...and they were like, “oh she worked really hard and she had all these AP classes until her senior year and then her senior year she had Keyboarding and whatever,”...that’s definitely something that was in my considerations, and I decided to take them...for me it was very much “this is how much work you have to do, so just do it.”

In my field notes, I described Sophia’s voice as changing to reflect what she imagined others would say and what she said to herself. In high school, Sophia was a determined student who often voiced her dream of flying F16s. Now a vivacious, animated 22-year-old, Sophia is finishing her Master’s in Mechanical Engineering and has been selected into the Air National Guard, fulfilling her dream of flying F16s. Another participant, Elliott, who described himself as “a determined worker,” is beginning his journey through medical school. He explained, “AP courses represented an opportunity to distinguish my transcript as well as clear prerequisites at the collegiate level...As a high school student, much of my focus was on creating a body of work for college applications.” These comments mirror the reflections of other participants who mentioned the college application process.

Despite the desire to augment application résumés, not all participants were able to reach their goals. Jimmy Diesel, 18 at the time of submitting his written reflection, had not yet begun college: “My main goal was to get into Harvard, Yale, or Stanford, none of which I was accepted into.” Though he was still accepted into a prestigious, selective university, Jimmy Diesel expressed some regret in that he felt “more compelled to get high scores on tests than to actually learn the material in a way that would stick or to go

beyond the classroom materials to learn things that were interesting to [him].” Even though College Board indicates that “students who scored 3 or higher on four popular AP Exams...were more likely to attend selective institutions” after high school (College Board, 7th *annual AP® report to the nation*, 2011, p. 2), students must also remember that successfully completion of multiple AP courses does not guarantee acceptance into choice selective and highly selective post-secondary schools. I have often heard my own students, past and present, express disappointment upon receiving rejection letters from selective and highly selective schools, despite their stellar academic and extracurricular records.

Preparedness for college/college credit. In addition to enhancing college application résumés, 10 participants cited the motivation of college preparedness or college credit. Continuing his reflection, 21-year-old Elliott wrote,

Due to the demands of AP courses, it was easy for me to make the decision to enroll in any AP course that I found interesting. I wanted to apply myself in an intellectually rigorous environment so that I would be prepared for academia in college. At the same time, I wanted to get a head start on the type of material I would see later on.

Jane, who recently completed her degree in Engineering Sciences and Applied Mathematics, revealed: “Throughout my senior year, I wanted to make sure I was learning as much as possible and taking my AP courses seriously to provide myself with a solid foundation for my college coursework.” Similarly, during a focus group, John stated, “I thought I would try to get a head start on what I might be learning in college and kind of just speed things along.” John, 20 years old, completed his undergraduate

degree in three years and planned to start medical school the following fall. Evan, a college freshman, considered the AP courses as a sort of “test.” He wrote,

I thought if I could complete a large number of AP courses, I would be more prepared to study and work in college...I hoped to just improve my study habits and prove to myself that I could take a lot of classes simultaneously that other people thought were difficult.

As described earlier, Evan only took three AP courses concurrently during his senior year; however, he was also a member of his high school’s Honors Program and enrolled each semester in an additional rigorous AP-level class designed to prepare students for a corresponding AP subject exam.

The appeal of gaining college credit also provided participants with significant motivation to take multiple AP courses. While explaining her motivations to others in her focus group, Sophia stated frankly, “I took all those college classes just kind of then I wouldn’t have to take them in college. Wouldn’t have to pay for them, I guess.” Kevin Elias, in his no-nonsense way, simply stated, “I also wanted the [community college] credit for it...because I didn’t want to take the college classes.” With the current economic downturn in the United States, earning college credit, either through a score of 3 or higher on an AP exam or through dual credit⁴⁹, appeals to many students.

Academic challenge and enjoyment. Enhancing résumés and preparing for college did not completely define motivation, though. In fact, 14 participants also addressed the desire to be challenged and the enjoyment of learning. Some participants

⁴⁹ Some high schools offer AP courses that receive dual credit through a local community college; thus, students receive high school credit for the course as well as community college credit for its college equivalent. In some cases, students are able to transfer the community college credit to fulfill basic graduation requirements and to transfer credit earned through an AP exam score to fulfill requirements and/or electives.

tackled the challenge head-on, despite attempts at dissuasion. Sam, a “19-year-old second-year senior...triple major in applied Physics, Integrative Physiology, and Mathematics” described himself as a “typical middle-class American child with an ethnic Asian background.” A strong-minded individual, Sam wrote, “when school counselors advised me against taking six AP courses at once, I was more than fascinated to take on the challenge. I hoped to accomplish this challenge.” Though Sam did not take six AP courses concurrently during his senior year, he did take an additional advanced course each semester, earning college credit in both courses. Freshman engineering major James Franco expressed, “I wished to challenge myself and surround myself with those who possessed similar goals. There was less wasted time and more learning to be had.” When asked why she took the AP courses, Jessica stated with a smile, “I think I took those five APs mainly to challenge myself. And I really do love to learn.” Marcus, who depicted himself as “a self-described geek...cerebral and analytical rather than intuitive and spontaneous,” wrote, “Most of my friends were taking AP courses, so personal pride was a motivator...Also, I think I would have been bored taking anything less challenging.” Anne, 30, has completed her medical training. She built upon Marcus’s thoughts: “There’s also that sense of not wanting to be bored so I preferred classes that had a higher caliber of students.”

Many of the participants who embraced the challenge of AP courses also confessed enjoyment in learning. Aaron, an 18-year-old who transferred close to 88 credits and is “technically a 5th year senior” after completing his first year of college, admitted, “I actually enjoyed such courses (and the education I was receiving). By my 12th grade year, I decided to take the courses...because I was genuinely excited for the

subject matter.” In his written reflection, 20-year-old Rex eloquently explained, “I wanted to cultivate my intellect and knowledge base with a diverse array of subject areas. By the end of it all I wanted to know more and be capable of knowing more.” For some participants, taking multiple AP courses changed their educational outlook. Another former student of mine, Kevin Elias, admitted he was a “putz” during high school because he didn’t necessarily want to be attending school at that point. At the same time, as he tackled his first year of college, he realized, “The AP classes changed the way that my academics work. And honestly, like now I love going to college...I think they were getting me to the point where I really did want to be in class because, you know, I legitimately enjoyed the classes.” In my field notes recorded after Kevin Elais’s interview, I noted that I had seen a different side of Kevin than the young man I had previously met, “a more serious, grown-up Kevin.” I would like to think that, based upon his reflections, his AP experiences assisted in this transformation. The drive to gain knowledge and to accept challenges also left some participants feeling as if the natural progression of their academic career was taking AP courses; they felt few other options existed.

Natural progression/lack of other choices. As they recalled their motivations for taking multiple AP courses, 11 individuals mentioned their perceived lack of other choices, either through the natural progression of their course selections throughout their high school career or through the educational program in which they were involved. When Abby, a 24-year-old with a B.A. in French Studies, considered her motivations for taking four or more AP courses concurrently, she wrote:

Basically, I took the AP courses because it was a natural extension of my previous coursework and because I was running out of classes to take...I had skipped several classes, so I was even more advanced than most students, meaning that AP courses were more or less all that I had left to take...(besides classes like shop and sewing, which are not exactly what a high-achieving student who wants a good scholarship should take).

Abby's older sister Anne reinforced this natural progression: "For the most part, I took these AP courses because they were the next step, especially for AP French." During her focus group session, 20-year-old Shriya asserted that "in terms of courses to take and what track you were on, it was just the next step." Jennifer, who felt more comfortable taking classes at an urban regional academy than her own suburban high school, conveyed that taking multiple AP courses was "the normal thing to do"; after all, she stated, "I was at school, and I should try my hardest; and that was just what the option was." Also attending classes at the regional academy, Rex explained, "that was the academic track I was following. I had already finished the general versions of those subject areas, and those were the next in the progression." Though not all participants alluded to a natural progression or even academic tracking, I noticed, through their words and actions, a common assumption that serious, college-bound students were supposed to take AP courses.

Six participants—Aaron, Dee, Evan, Heath, Michael, and Ronald—mentioned their involvement in their suburban high school's Honors Program⁵⁰ track as a primary motivation for taking multiple AP courses. These six individuals were among the

⁵⁰ This Honors Program, detailed in an earlier footnote, requires students to complete 9 AP courses as a component of the Honors Diploma designation.

inaugural members of this Honors Program. Just finishing her first year as an undergraduate engineering study, Dee wrote,

I took them because they were required for the Honors Program. I think I would have dropped some of my senior AP courses (like AP Spanish, maybe AP Physics and maybe AP Lang) if I didn't feel like I had to take them.

She reinforced this sentiment during the focus group as well: "since I was in the Honors Program and stuff, basically I had to take all the AP courses." Heath sat for an interview during his winter break following his first term at a highly selective East Coast university. When asked why he had taken the multiple AP courses, Heath replied:

Pretty much solely for the purposes of the Honors Program...not to say that I wouldn't have taken some of them if it weren't for the Honors Program, but the Honors Program is definitely the only reason I took all of them. Or that I would have thought about taking all of them.

In his written reflection, 18-year-old Michael wrote, "I needed to take them [the AP courses] to complete the Honor's Program." Echoing their Honors Program cohort members, Aaron, Evan, and Ronald also pointed out that the Honors Program left them little choice but to take four or more AP courses concurrently.

During their teenage years, many adolescents often spread their wings, try new things, and exert a sense of independence. However, in embracing these features of adolescence, teenagers are also often introduced to new pressures and angst. High-ability and high-achieving students who decide—by choice or by force—to follow a rigorous academic schedule that includes taking four or more AP courses concurrently may find themselves facing additional stress.

Stress Levels

As readers think of their own high school years, they might recall periods of stress that affected all aspects of their lives. Assouline and Colangelo (2006) describe adolescence as,

...a time characterized by vibrant discovery, growth, and transformation—of mind and body—changes that appear to accelerate uncontrollably...the malleability of thought and personality patterns often manifest in fluctuating tastes in music, humor, values, philosophy of life, and commitment to education.

While the high school years is often portrayed in popular media as relatively fun and carefree, readers will likely recollect numerous stressors that often seemed to change by the day, if not by the hour. High school students who take multiple AP courses often face the same periods of stress caused by the same types of stressors as faced their classmates who choose different academic paths.

Neihart et al. (2002) found that high-ability teenagers face the same social-emotional problems as do other teenagers and that failure to address the affective needs of high-ability teenagers may result in an inability to actualize their potential. After listening the participants' stories, little doubt exists that stress plays a significant role in taking four or more AP courses concurrently. In their examination of students enrolled in an IB program, Suldo, Shaunessy, and Hardesty (2008) found that high-achieving students enrolled in a rigorous academic IB program, which is similar to taking four or more AP courses concurrently, "perceived more stress than students in the general education curriculum" (p. 285-286). Yet their research did not present students' perceptions of this stress. Participants in this study described how a variety of sources

contributed to the stress they felt while taking multiple AP courses, ranging from homework and preparing for tests, to worrying about their future, to family pressures, to an assortment of extraneous stressors.

During the interviews and written reflections, participants shared various stresses and challenges in their lives during the time of four or more concurrent AP courses. Rex wrote, “I also faced the standard stresses of an adolescent during that time period such as college selection, extracurricular activities, social pressures, familial pressures, etc.” When responding to the interview and written reflection protocols (see Appendices F & H), the majority of participants treated the terms “stresses” and “challenges” synonymously; therefore, for the sake of clear communication, I used the term “stress” in the focus group protocols (see Appendices K & L).

As participants reflected upon the stresses they faced during their high school years, it became evident that taking four or more AP courses did contribute to the stress in their lives. Dee admitted to significant stress during her senior year as she attempted to juggle all she placed on her plate: “During senior year, I tried to manage my schoolwork with college applications, music activities, volunteering at the hospital, and all the Honors⁵¹ things like Senior Exhibition⁵² along with my Scholar in Music Capstone⁵³.” The stresses identified by participants in this study can be organized into four horizons: (a) homework load and test preparation, (b) future considerations, (c) parent family, and (d) extraneous stressors.

⁵¹ Referring to the Honors Program in her suburban, Midwestern high school.

⁵² Honors Program participants were expected to present a senior exhibition in order to be awarded an Honors Designation on their diploma at graduation.

⁵³ In addition to the Honors Program, the aforementioned suburban, Midwestern high school has also established a Scholars program, which allows students to specialize in a particular area of study, such as mathematics or art, by following a pre-determined set of courses within that area of study and participating in a Capstone Project to highlight their learning and their accomplishments in that area of study.

Homework load and test preparation. Most readers familiar with adolescents might surmise that high school students often bemoan the amount of homework and tests they have. Therefore, readers may not be surprised that 21 of the 24 participants mentioned homework and tests in response to questions addressing stresses and challenges (see Appendices F, H, K, & L). In recalling the amount of homework, Dee elaborated, “I felt like I had a lot of homework, maybe two to five hours a day, probably an average of three hours,” which led to her belief that she “might have burnt out senior year.” During her senior year, Dee took AP Language and Composition for which she completed an ethnography project on the culture of a local fire station, taking over 16 weeks to complete. I understood the underlying significance in her words, recognizing the tremendous time and effort she put into completing this project. Evan⁵⁴ calculated that “[d]oing the bare minimum of homework often took four or five hours a night.” Jake, who admitted his tendency “to be blunt,” wrote, “I grew to hate school at some points because it was so much work and so stressful. All of this stress was due to APs.” Both Jane and Jennifer also remarked that most of their evenings were filled with homework from AP courses. Among participants who addressed their homework load, they seemed to agree that enrollment in multiple AP courses during an academic year notably increased their homework load.

Two participants suggested that their thoughts constantly revolved around homework. Describing herself as “introverted, curious, and open-minded” and as someone who has “a hard time making decisions,” Abby recalled that she “had many hours of homework every night” and that she “was stressing about all the homework,”

⁵⁴ As mentioned earlier, Evan was enrolled in 3 official AP courses as well as an additional advanced course each semester. The coursework in these advanced classes mirrored that of official AP courses.

even when she was not doing homework. Throughout her reflection, Abby repeatedly mentioned the stress associated with this homework and how the stress affected her life. At one point, she admitted, “Emotionally my homework was extremely stressful for me. The idea of doing homework consumed my life and ruined that time of my life for me.” Later, she divulged, “Homework for me was a daily hell, and I wish I had been more capable of dealing with it.” Just three months after graduating from high school, Jimmy Diesel wrote, “I was constantly stressed out about how I would find time to do all of my homework or study enough for tests... The majority of my stress was due to my AP classes, because I spent most of my time doing something related to these classes.” Jimmy Diesel described himself as “a perfectionist and a highly compulsive student” who “worked too carefully and slowly on homework and studying for tests” because of his goal to score a 5 on every AP exam and to have straight A’s in high school. Though not directly declared in his written reflection, Jimmy Diesel appeared to be as consumed by homework and studying for tests as was Abby—the six years that separated their ages did not separate their stresses.

In some cases, participants linked the homework load associated with multiple AP courses to unfavorable health issues. Aaron, who disclosed that he suffered from bouts of depression during high school, was particularly straightforward in his recollections of challenges he faced while taking five AP courses during his senior year:

However, the last (and most severe) bout of depression I dealt with during that year (second semester) was in large part associated with taking multiple AP courses. There were additional pressures, such as family-related issues, but I believe that the primary cause of the depressive episode was stress stemming from

a seemingly unsurmountable [*sic*] pile of schoolwork which I had allowed to accumulate.

As an AP teacher who sees students similar to Aaron in my classroom every year, I felt familiar with his struggles. While Aaron associated increased homework with his depression in his written reflection, he later noted during his focus group that “nonacademic things” had greatly contributed to his stress as well. Ralph, also struggled with the workload during his senior year. Added to the expected work required by his AP and advanced courses⁵⁵, Ralph was also “HEAVILY involved with debating at the time.” To deal with the work load, Ralph turned to “prescription drugs (Adderall),” which he believed at the time “improved...work ethic and increased motivation and focus.” This unhealthy dependency later turned into an addiction. Like Aaron, though, Ralph also divulged other issues that contributed to his stress and subsequent addiction. I discuss these extraneous issues in a later section.

Several participants also referenced an increased amount of stress tied to AP exams. James Franco recorded, “Stress came in the form of tests and competition.” The very idea of AP exams evoked memories of anxiety in some participants. John, using hand gestures to emphasize his response⁵⁶, pointed out the stress surrounding AP exams during his interview:

...the AP tests were probably the most nerve-wracking week⁵⁷ of my life because

I was just trying to cram information into my head, and it didn’t really fit my style

⁵⁵ Though, Ralph enrolled in only 3 AP courses concurrently during an academic year, the addition of an advanced course during one semester and his involvement in Debate (arguably an intense, academic extracurricular activity) warranted his inclusion in this study.

⁵⁶ In my field notes, I noted participants’ appearances and body language during interview and focus group sessions.

⁵⁷ Though AP exams span two weeks in May, most participants lumped the weeks together.

because I didn't remember a lot of that information after the week. So I didn't feel like I learned anything...the tests were just stressful, period.

Rex also attributed increased stress to AP exams: "Had I not taken the AP exams, I wouldn't have found the classes nearly as stressful." Elliott's "most memorable challenge" involved the AP exams in May: "Preparing for multiple exams was even more of a time crunch than when I had only homework assignments to juggle." Jessica took five AP exams during her junior year and recalled:

...during AP week, I felt really stressed because it just seemed like there was so much I needed to do, and I would never finish...I remember taking AP Physics and AP Bio on the same day, for the AP testing, and I really—eight hours of testing was—it was a mental hurdle for me...I don't know if I would do that again.

Each time participants mentioned AP exams in response to questions about challenges and stresses, they associated the exams with added stress. Often, performance expectations, whether internal or external, compounded the stress associated with the AP exams.

One participant conveyed noteworthy bitterness toward the College Board, which governs AP coursework and exams. In response to the invitation to add further thoughts regarding the phenomenon of taking four or more AP courses concurrently during two consecutive semesters, Jake wrote:

I hate the College Board. I hate how they have a monopoly on educational services. I hate how their stupid test (including the SATs) and their stupid policies ruin kids' lives. I hate how people (I was sadly one of them) let the College Board

dominate their existence and high school experience. I hate how the College Board makes high school so stressful. Yes, they prepare students well and perhaps gauge a student's ability fairly, but they ruin kids' lives [*sic*].

Jake had not yet completed his first semester of college when he submitted his written reflection; thus, memories of his high school experiences remained fresh, and his resentment of the College Board had perhaps not yet tempered with time.

Future considerations. Along with performance-based stress connected to homework and test preparation, 11 participants brought up stress associated with their plans for the future. Jake, who characterized his high school as “a college acceptance pressure cooker,” reflected:

Looking back, I feel like for a certain group of kids [in his high school] college acceptance defined their high school experience. Most of these kids averaged a schedule of minimum 4 AP classes per year; some took as many as 6 or 7. I think for some of those kids college application season was the worst time of their lives. Many were probably pushed by their parents but also many were self motivated...Of course, this is only a group of maybe 30 of the 506 I graduated with.

Sophia commented twice on the stress related to college applications. During her interview, she stated, “there was this big collage of college things that were really stressful...I think that's a big stress that people kind of ignore in senior students.” Sophia did not isolate this college-related stress to students who took multiple AP courses; yet during her focus group, she did allude that such stress was compounded by taking four or more AP courses: “every high school senior deals with [the stress of getting into college]

and then we deal with it on top of everything else that we're going through." Dave Gretson and his older sister Anne both commented on the stress of "applying for college," as well. Moreover, "deciding which college to go to" caused additional stress for Dave Gretson. Heath also alluded to the stress of determining which college to attend.

Addressing the stresses faced during the time participants took four or more AP courses concurrently, Jane, a 22-year-old graduate of a highly selective university in the Midwest, recalls:

I felt the pressure to perform in my extracurricular activities, pressure to spend time with my family, boyfriend, and friends, and pressure to keep straight A's in my classes. Many of these things related directly to an overwhelming pressure to get accepted into a top university, which was constantly on my mind during my senior year.

As a high school senior, Ronald had set his sights on attending a highly selective college, which added performance-related stress: "given that I wanted to go to a good school, it was important for me that I was not only taking the four or more AP classes but that I was also doing well in all of them." Ralph also perceived "pressure...to get into a good institution." At the time, he questioned himself: "How could I best distinguish myself from those I'm competing with across the nation to get into 'that' school?" His response, "AP courses." Admitting to focusing more on high test scores than learning the material, Jimmy Diesel wrote,

The bad part about feeling the pressure of getting into the highly selective schools is that I felt much more compelled to get high scores on tests than to actually learn

the material in a way that would stick or to go beyond the classroom materials to learn things that were interesting to me.

Despite his high test scores, though, Jimmy Diesel's goal of receiving acceptance letters to three named highly selective schools never came to fruition.

Thinking far into the future, both Elliott and John observed their concerns regarding medical school. Elliott remarked, "I knew that a major mistake as a junior in high school could have implications that reached as far as medical school admissions decisions six years down the road." Similarly, John worried, "if I don't get an A in this [AP] class, then I'm not going to get into college; and if I don't get into college, then I'm never going to med school." He found himself "getting caught up in the long-term scheme of...what a simple grade might do."

Parent/family. For some, parents and family added to the stress in participants' lives during the time they enrolled in four or more AP courses. Ten participants specifically referenced stress related to parents and/or family in their responses. In some cases, the stress resulted from performance expectations; in other cases, the stress stemmed from family-related issues. Jessica, an only child of two highly educated parents, started school in the United States after her parents immigrated from China. She commented on their influence in her academic choices: "My parents, of course, pushed me in some ways to take some of the AP courses, thinking that [these courses]...better prepare me for college." Jessica's parents were products of the Chinese education system, both having earned advanced degrees. As their only daughter, she remarked, "the stress was always there, the expectations, my parents' expectations were always there for me." John, whose parents held doctoral degrees earned in India, also described his parents'

“high expectation” as “really stressful.” Though neither Jessica nor John associated their parents’ high expectations with their parents’ educational backgrounds as well as their choice to make a new home in the United States, I cannot help but to contemplate the connection.

Writing about the stress in his life while taking multiple AP courses, Michael elaborated, “At the time it was stressful because my parents believed I could get all A’s and wanted me to get all A’s while I felt that that was too difficult a task.” Shriya’s parents set the “standard of doing well” at an early age: “my parents expected A’s.” Providing further explanation during the focus group, Shriya stated, “my parents had always told me, like, ‘Do your best,’ and ‘We expect the best’.” In Ralph’s case, his taking AP courses and his participating in debate acted as a sort of façade: “my parents assumed that I was a stellar student...they thought their student was all right.” His parents could not see that he was “extremely stressed, overworked, tired and confused.”

Not all parent/family stress was performance-based, however. Heath, involved in school sponsored athletics and choirs in addition to participating in his school’s Honors Program, spoke of his mother’s worry regarding his well-being while he filled his schedule with multiple AP courses and activities: “my mom, especially, just was always so worried about me...I mean, that’s normal for any mom, but it was really over the top senior year...she really feared that I was not going to be okay.” During this time of taking multiple AP courses and pursuing various activities, the relationship between Heath and his mother suffered; he expanded, “to keep my mom not stressed, stressed me out...so that was a big issue.” When I asked if he associated his mom’s stress, and his stress, with his AP schedule, Heath replied, “Definitely.” Jimmy Diesel described himself as a

“stressed out person in high school” and as having “short temper,” which would “manifest itself in arguments with [his] dad.” Evan also acknowledged a strained relationship with his dad during his senior year; however, he did not directly attribute this to his course load. Aaron mentioned “family-related issues” as well, part of which stemmed from the fact that his parents “didn’t want to bother” him as he studied. Jennifer also alluded to “family problems,” though she felt these problems were “more of like a power struggle.”

Some of the parent/family related stress only tangentially connected to multiple AP courses. Because his parents “didn’t want to pay for the AP tests,” Kevin Elias admitted to “freaking out” about “scrap[ing] up all the money in order to [take 7 AP exams].” He went on to express relief that the Iowa legislature reduced these fees by \$40 per exam during his senior year⁵⁸. Abby experienced a different sort of family stress. She explained, “I also had many family members who died around this time (one per year every year in junior high and high school), so that was an additional stress, especially since I was present for some of the deaths.” Her mention of family deaths six years after graduating from high school suggests the emotional impact of these deaths at the time.

Extraneous stressors. As alluded to earlier, several participants referenced extraneous factors that contributed to the stress of taking four or more AP courses concurrently during an academic year. Sophia, Jane, Heath, Michael, Jimmy Diesel, Rex, and Ronald all touched on stresses related to their social lives and to their relationships with friends. Heath recalled stress in “deciding which relationships to foster and really doing that.” Michael explained, “I was also stressed about making decisions about

⁵⁸ At that time, the College Board charged \$86 per exam. Through a one-time allocation of funding by the Iowa legislature, AP fees for Iowa students were reduced \$40 per exam taken in May 2009 (Iowa Department of Education, 2010).

hanging with my friends based on my amount of limited free time.” In retrospect, concerning relationships and social lives, Sophia, a graduate student, chuckled, “when you’re a senior in high school, you think that it actually matters, when it doesn’t really.”

Involvement in extracurricular activities also caused additional stress in participants’ lives. Jane felt pressure related to extracurricular activities as did Shriya and Rex. Jennifer faced stress in trying to do her best during swim meets as well as in band; she articulated, “Band would stress me out a lot, just because I was supposed to be the best so it’s kind of hard to live up to that sometimes.” Dave Gretson also mentioned “stresses of trying to perform well in mock trial.” Performance in extracurricular activities was of particular concern to some participants. Jimmy Diesel confessed, “I was stressed out about tennis because I have played since I was four years old, but can never seem to win as much as I would like [*sic*].” In fact, he reported, “I was much more stressed when I was playing a tennis match than I was before a test.” Also involved in sports, Jake felt “added stress” his junior and senior year, chiefly related to “the D1 recruiting process”⁵⁹ he went through.

During their focus group session, Aaron and Ronald spoke of their shared experiences in debate. Both attributed the number of missed school days to their involvement in debate. Aaron surmised that he “missed 30 days of school” during his senior year, and Ronald estimated that he missed “40-45 days senior year.” Unlike Ronald who felt that the “days off” gave him “a chance to catch up on work,” Aaron “wasn’t really able to do schoolwork on...the days [he] was gone.” Furthermore, Aaron acknowledged that had he not been involved in his extracurricular activity, he “would

⁵⁹ Division 1, a collegiate ranking system for sports teams regulated by the National Collegiate Athletic Association. For more information, visit:
<http://www.ncaa.org/wps/wcm/connect/public/ncaa/home/index.html>

have definitely been a lot less stressed.” Ronald also admitted, “It seemed more like debate...made things a lot more stressful because...I would be missing a lot of class then I would just be getting behind.” Even though participants enjoyed their extracurricular activities, as highlighted in a later section, such activities did result in additional stress.

As I had expected, each participant shared unique lived experiences of stress and challenges; and while similarities existed among the experiences of some, others stood out as inimitable among the group. During her senior year of high school, Anne discovered that she had “cubital tunnel syndrome,” which resulted in “surgery on both elbows (one in December, one in March).” In addition, she acknowledged, “I struggled with my weight that year and ended up doing Weight Watchers with my mom and losing almost 50 pounds over the first semester or so of my senior year.” For Jimmy Diesel and Kevin Elias, stress came in the form of outside interests: respectively, that “the DNA fragment refused to be cloned into the plasmid” and “trying to write a novel within a month.” Abby recounted that she went through “a period of depression...which only multiplied the stress [she] was suffering from.” In fact, she reported: “I had so many troubles with concentration and motivation that there was question of whether I had AD/HD.” Though these stresses involved choices participants made outside their academic pursuits, the stresses left an indelible mark on their recollections of the time period.

Two participants revealed acutely personal stresses present in their lives during the period of taking four or more AP courses concurrently. Their stories are difficult to summarize, so I’ve retained their full explanations, even though excerpts have been

presented earlier. Aaron, characterized as a high-ability and high-achieving individual, detailed:

The two largest challenges I faced during my 12th grade year (both in the latter half) were (a) coming out to peers, teachers, and family as bisexual and (b) dealing with severe self-inflicted harm and depression. I was on the verge of committing suicide at multiple points throughout the year; it was only because of the repeated efforts of friends and teachers that I somehow made it out alive...

The first challenge (coming out) was prompted in part by a gender and sexuality unit in my AP Language & Composition class, but was not a direct product of that class or of taking five AP courses. However, the last (and most severe) bout of depression I dealt with during that year (second semester) was in large part associated with taking multiple AP courses. There were additional pressures, such as family-related issues, but I believe that the primary cause of the depressive episode was stress stemming from a seemingly unsurmountable [*sic*] pile of schoolwork which I had allowed to accumulate. The courses themselves (and even five of them as an aggregate) were not inherently this difficult, but I had not previously been completing enough work to adequately cope. Especially in the case of my AP Language & Composition course, where the vast majority of the second semester was devoted to completing individual ethnographic research projects, I had fallen far behind expectations and seemed to be at high risk of failing the course (if the research was not completed).

Aaron's reflections of his lived experiences were written close to one year after the time period in which they occurred; thus, the memories of these experiences, as well as their

impacts, are still quite vivid. Through outside intervention, Aaron survived this time period and currently thrives in his collegiate surroundings. However, his lived experiences expose a very real truth: high-ability and high-achieving students can still be severely affected by stresses, whether academic or nonacademic.

Ralph also dealt with stress loosely related to his academic track, a stress that continued to plague him for several years. In response to a question about his schedule while taking multiple AP courses, Ralph reported:

My schedule: AP Spanish V, AP Literature, AP United States History, American Political Culture, Debate IV, Physical Education course. I vaguely remember the last part of my senior year. At this time, I had begun to abuse prescription drugs (Adderall) to complete my work. I was HEAVILY involved with debating at the time. As a matter of fact, I first started experimenting with stimulants with fellow debaters. It improved our work ethic and increased motivation and focus—so we thought. It should be no surprise that less than year after graduating high school, I had become a full blown addict (experimenting later with crystal meth). I don't want to blame the stressful schedule, debating and my extracurricular activities [for] my drug addiction—certainly this would be wrong. However, it did help me to cope with the extreme workload, stress, and high expectations that I felt I had to fulfill.

Ralph named “stress and anxiety” during his senior year as playing considerable role in his struggles; however, other forces were also at play. He continued:

I was extremely stressed, overworked, tired and confused. This is not to say this was caused by an overload of AP courses. During this time, I also struggled [with]

coming to terms with my sexual orientation and finding acceptance among my high school peers and family.

Four years after graduating from high school, Ralph expressed a sort of appreciation towards his stresses and struggles during high school:

Today, I am grateful for this. It may sound odd, but I am. If it wasn't for my addiction, I would not have found a better way of life, clean and sober. Recovery has given me the ability to use my higher power to cope with extreme amounts of stress and heavy workloads today. I did not have this when I was taking my AP classes and participating heavily in debate.

Though their lived experiences differed, Ralph and Aaron share the common thread of struggling with their sexual orientation during their high school career. They also illustrate genuine struggles that some adolescents face during their high school careers, regardless of perceived ability or achievements.

In addition to stresses related to rigorous academic schedules, high expectations, and oft cited forms of teenage angst, these high-achieving individuals frequently complicated their schedules further with a variety of extracurricular activities during their high school careers.

Extracurricular Activities

While often viewed as necessary for college applications, extracurricular activities also exacted much from participants, as they recalled. All participants in this study noted involvement in at least one extracurricular activity, school related or nonschool related, requiring significant time commitment while taking four or more AP courses

concurrently. In fact, most had filled their schedules with a variety of activities, ranging from music to athletics to volunteering to church.

Three participants directly related extracurricular involvement to becoming well-rounded students. Speaking to others in her focus group, Shriya explained, “being in multiple things at one time in high school...made me more well-rounded, and I made more friends and stuff like that.” In response, Rex chuckled and stated,

The load was definitely much greater and a lot more strenuous...especially coupled with all of the activities you have to be doing: the community service and all of the other stuff that will show that you’re a well-rounded person I suppose.

Just as participants perceived that taking multiple AP courses benefitted their college application résumés, Sam also expressed the same sentiment concerning involvement in extracurricular activities. Sam, determined to “surpass expectations” and “to be the best,” summarized his beliefs concerning extracurricular involvement: “As with any determined student, taking many AP courses does not accurately depict a well-rounded, successful individual; getting involved with a school activity—or many—was one way to demonstrate students’ intelligence and activeness.” He professed, “being busy gives me significance in day-to-day life.” Furthermore, involvement in extracurricular activities allowed Sam “to get involved...find students with similar drive and passion...and build a résumé.”

This underlying sentiment prevailed throughout the participants’ reflections, represented primarily by the number and variety of activities in which they were involved while also taking four or more AP courses concurrently. Table 4.3 contains a self-

reported record of participants' involvement in activities during the time they enrolled in multiple AP courses.

Some participants revealed that the activities themselves providing a break from the academic stress, while others made social connections and friendships through the activities. In some cases, involvement in extracurricular activities demanded so much time, though, that participants spoke of having to choose between academics and activities. Sometimes, performance levels decreased either in their academic pursuits or in their extracurricular activity. A few participants were forced to drop extracurricular activities in order to meet the demands of taking four or more AP courses.

In the interview and written reflection protocols, I merely asked the question, "What other activities were you involved in?" (see Appendices F & H). In response, though, 16 participants offered more than a mere list of their activities, often including statements about the time they spent as well as how the activities related to their academic schedules. As a result, I developed a question for the follow-up focus group to glean more information concerning their involvement in extracurricular activities (see Appendices K & L):

Many participants noted involvement in a number of extracurricular activities—both school-based and nonschool-based. Even though you may have shared individually, would you talk a little more about your activities and how your involvement in these activities impacted your academic lives during the 4+ AP year(s)?

Table 4.3. Participants and Extracurricular Activities.

Participant	Extracurricular Activities While Taking 4 or More AP Courses (self-reported)
Aaron	School related: Academic Debate
Abby	School related: Orchestra, Mock Trial, Knowledge Bowl, Principal's Advisory Council Outside school: Work (10 hours/week), Community parking campaign
Anne	School related: Orchestra class, Chamber Orchestra, Symphony Orchestra, AP French Club (president), Volleyball Outside school: Dance lessons, Church youth choir, Church Choir, Bell choir, Volunteer at a local hospital—newborn nursery and oncology floor
Dave Gretson	School related: Principal's Advisory Committee, Knowledge Bowl, Habitat for Humanity (school club president) Outside school: Weekly cello lessons, Mock Trial
Dee	School related: All-State auditions & IMTA (piano competition) Outside school: Weekly piano lesson, Weekly violin lesson, Volunteer at a local hospital, Church
Elliott	School related: Piano, Orchestra, Debate, Mock Trial, Quiz Bowl, Academic Decathlon
Evan	School related: Swim Team, Intramurals Outside school: Internship with a local university
Heath	School related: Sports (year-round with off-season training), A Cappella group, Choir, National Honors Society Outside school: Church activities (multiple nights), Bible study (2 nd semester), Youth group
Jake	School related: Sports (winter and spring with off-season training; D1 recruit), Student Council
James Franco	School related: Band, Math Club (State championships), Biology Club, Honor Bands, Varsity Swimming, Varsity Track and Field, Tennis
Jane	School related: Varsity Volleyball, Varsity Golf, Mock Trial, Science Bowl, French Club, National Honors Society, Student Council Outside school: Club Volleyball
Jennifer	School related: Swim Team, Synchro Swim Team, Band, Jazz Band, Mock Trial, School Ambassador Outside school: Church, Youth group
Jessica	School related: Mock Trial, Tennis, Student Council Outside school: Volunteer with Keepers of the Land, Other volunteer work
Jimmy Diesel	School related: Tennis Outside school: Volunteer at a local hospital, Volunteer research—DNA subcloning project (school year = 6 hours/week; summer = 30 hours/week)

Table 4.3. Participants and Extracurricular Activities (cont.).

Participant	Extracurricular Activities While Taking 4 or More AP Courses (self-reported)
John	School related: Marching Band, Concert Band, Jazz Band, Habitat for Humanity, School-based Abstinence Movement, World Cultures Club, Soccer Team Manager, Intramurals Outside school: Work (20-21 hours/week), Church, Youth group
Kevin Elias	School related: Mock Trial, Academic Decathlon Outside school: Work (20 hours/week), Church youth group
Marcus	School related: Robotics Club (founder), National History Day competition, AcademyCommunity.com (founder, architect), Regional Academy Dance (founder, organizer, creative director), Math Club, Debate Team
Michael	School related: Soccer (year-round), Football, Intramural Basketball, Fellowship of Christian Athletes Outside school: Club Soccer
Ralph	School related: Debate, National Honors Society, Large Group Speech
Rex	School related: Debate, Mock Trial, National History Day, Math competitions
Ronald	School related: Debate, Principal's Advisory Committee, Intramural Ultimate Frisbee Outside school: Community service—volunteer at a local church and a local community attraction
Sam	School related: Student Government (senator), Ping-Pong Club (president), Model United Nations (delegate), Mock Trial (attorney), Knowledge Bowl, School Ambassador Outside school: Volunteer at local hospitals, Work
Shriya	School related: Volleyball, Orchestra, Mock Trial, Shadow experience through the Regional Academy, National Honor Society, School Ambassador Outside school: Violin
Sophia	School related: Science Bowl, Varsity Golf, Intramural Bowling Outside school: Rode horses, Work

While studying participants' recollections of extracurricular involvement, three main horizons emerged: (a) time commitment and constraint, (b) benefits, and (c) impact on academics.

Time commitment and constraint. In addition to their commitment to academics, many participants devoted considerable time and effort to extracurricular

activities, in some cases to the detriment of their academic pursuits. Among participants, debate proved the activity most commonly associated with sizeable time commitment as well as with strain on academics. When responding to the basic question regarding the activities in which he was involved (see Appendix H), Ralph wrote, “Debate, Debate, Debate. School, School, School.” His simple response hints at how much debate consumed his life at the time. Describing his participation in debate, Ronald stated, “I really didn’t do all that much besides debate because of the fact that it was so time consuming, and I had to be at debate practice for like between six to eight hours each week...and I was gone for tournaments say every other week.” Ronald’s debate teammate Aaron, who was slightly less involved in debate as was Ronald, expanded,

By my senior year, I competed at debate tournaments around the country during at least a third of the weekends out of the school year, attended debate practices after school at least twice per week, and spent a substantial amount of time outside of school researching and writing arguments in preparation for competition.

As revealed earlier, debate also caused Ronald to miss around “40-45 days senior year.” These absences forced Ronald to “catch up” on schoolwork when he wasn’t traveling for debate, causing him to be “in a frenzy trying to get everything made up.” Rex also claimed that he “put too much focus on debate” and viewed the activity as “one that only gave you more stress.”

Participants engaged in athletic activities also remarked on the time demands involved. Jane wrote, “My athletic commitments prevented me from spending more than an hour on homework before 10:00 p.m. I was often up late finishing homework assignments for my AP courses.” Jake’s involvement in sports during winter and spring

as well as his “more focused” off-season training due to the D1 recruiting process “added stress [to his] junior and senior year.” Similarly, though tennis was a source of great stress, Jimmy Diesel continued to play “played an average of 11 hours per week.” Heath explained, “I usually had, depending upon the season, at least one practice right after school.”

When listing her activities in her written reflection, Abby took a moment to indicate that Mock Trial was “a significant time commitment,” the only activity after which she made such a comment. Abby’s older sister Anne, also listing a variety of activities in which she was involved during her senior year, shared with members of her focus group that she “didn’t have enough [class] periods anymore to take both orchestra and choir,” resulting in her choice of orchestra. Choir was then relegated to a church activity.

In some cases, participants felt that their performance or involvement in extracurricular activities suffered as a result of taking multiple AP courses. During her focus group, Dee expressed that she did not have enough time to focus on her extracurricular activities due to the priority she placed on her AP coursework:

I also had like piano and violin and all those things going on so usually that happened right after school, and my programs in those areas kind of suffered because of my AP courses because I didn’t have enough time to practice; and I was more focused on school because I felt school should be the most important part of my life at that moment.

Though John derived benefit from his involvement in music, he also felt that his involvement suffered. Agreeing with Dee, he elaborated: “I really liked music, and I

think it did suffer when I was taking those AP classes...because it took away time from practice.” John also admitted he had considered the time commitment involved when making his extracurricular choice: “I think I chose [band] because it required the least amount of...time....If I was doing sports, I think I would have been way more devoted for that season than I was during the whole year for band.” While the participants above chose to continue in extracurricular activities, they also acknowledge the amount of time as well as the constraints such activities cost.

Benefits. Participants cited a mixture of benefits derived from extracurricular involvement. Continuing his thoughts regarding his involvement in music, John testified, “I think at the same time [music] was more interesting to me at that time because it wasn’t AP courses, so it was like a nice break during the school day from those things and after school.” Similarly, Sophia conceded that “golf took a lot of time”; however, she also profited in that this was time “away from homework, and you couldn’t think about homework when you were doing it.” Taking her heaviest AP load during her junior year, Jessica found benefit in playing tennis: “I think playing tennis actually helped too...doing anything other than academics was key.” Extracurricular involvement allowed participants not only to escape the rigors of coursework but also to expand their friendships. Anne reported,

I had a lot of friends outside in volleyball and choir and orchestra and dance. So, in some ways, they were kind of like I had separate lives...I didn’t focus on work a lot when I was doing my activities.

Jane “gained immense satisfaction and joy from” participating in sports and felt that her success in those sports “helped alleviate the stress” caused by her rigorous AP schedule.

Despite taking time away from academic pursuits, extracurricular activities, whether or not school-related, allowed a sort of escape for these participants.

Along with a break from coursework, extracurricular activities enhanced social lives, added enjoyment to students' lives, and even increased time management skills. As noted earlier, John maintained his involvement with music activities as "a kind of hobby" that he "really enjoyed." Like Anne, Shriya "made more friends" through her activities. Plus, she enjoyed her activities. When speaking of volleyball, she rationalized: "I just liked it so I just did that. It was more of like a fun thing 'cause I wasn't great at it. I just like the atmosphere." Jessica also remembered "enjoying all those activities" and "having a lot of good friends through [her] extracurricular activities."

For two participants, the time commitment improved time management skills. Heath felt that his busy schedule helped him to be "more productive in the end":

I definitely felt like I was doing my best work when I was on a short time schedule, and given my time schedule I was always on a short time schedule; so rather than stress me out, that tended to motivate me.

Likewise, Sophia used her time "a lot wiser [*sic*] during the second half of the [second] semester" due to her dedication to golf; she explained: "I knew that after class, I wasn't going to have time to do anything." Perhaps high-achieving participants derived the same sort of pleasure and motivation from their extracurricular involvement as they did from their involvement in rigorous coursework.

Impact on academics. Despite the benefits connected to involvement in extracurricular activities, a few participants also observed a negative impact on their academic performance. Three participants who were heavily involved in debate

recognized its negative impact. Though he described himself in his written reflection as “insanely competitive” in terms of academic performance, Aaron admitted during the focus group, “I spent probably a lot more time on debate work than on school work, and that was because I enjoyed debate a lot more than most of the schoolwork.” Rex, valuing knowledge and being informed, still divulged that he “put too much focus on debate and not enough on...schoolwork,” leaving the impression that perhaps he should have devoted more time to schoolwork. Regarding the amount of school missed due to debate, Ronald explained,

It also made things a lot more difficult because they would be teaching things in class that I missed the opportunity to learn, or like maybe it wasn’t explained quite as well in the textbook, so I had to rely on friends a lot to learn certain things.

Sophia, who also missed school due to her devotion to golf, was unable to take advantage of a privilege based on good attendance offered to students in her high school: she “couldn’t opt out of finals,” even though her absences were related to a school activity.

Sophia also described a drop in her academic performance:

If you made a graph of my [academic] performance in that semester [golf season], you’d see it drop significantly after the first week in April because I just didn’t care as much about school as I did about going to play golf, but I cared enough to make sure that I wasn’t going to fail anything...I did the amount of work that needed to be done, but I certainly wasn’t trying to get an A in everything by any means.

Even though the participants above realized the negative impacts of their respective extracurricular activities on their academics, they maintained involvement and did not voice regret for having done so.

Sacrifices Attributed to Course Load

With the combination of a rigorous course load and multiple extracurricular activities came inevitable sacrifices. Jake, explained, “taking four [AP courses] at a time, even the four that I took during my senior year (which I consider to be relatively easy), will require some severe sacrifices to be made in the short term.” Yet perhaps memories of sacrifices fade with time and other life experiences. At 30 years old, Anne had completed her undergraduate degree, her graduate degree, and was preparing to embark upon a three-year fellowship in neonatology when she agreed to participate in this study. Addressing a question about sacrifices she made while taking four or more AP courses (see Appendix H), she wrote, “I’m not really sure I made any. If you asked me this question closer to the actual time, I might have answered differently; but looking back 12 years later, there is nothing that stands out to me.” Later, during her focus group, she could only recall that she had given up “jazz choir” due to her academic schedule. Elliott, preparing to enter medical school at age 22, reinforced Anne’s reflections: “Now as a graduate student, I can safely say that I never had to sacrifice to the degree that I had to in college.”

On the other hand, memories of sacrifices may depend upon the perceived impact of the sacrifices. Anne’s younger sister Abby still recalled sacrifices ranging from the lack of a social life to lack of sleep to lack of motivation to unusual eating habits. Despite these sacrifices and struggles, she earned a full-tuition scholarship to a selective

university and graduated with a Bachelor's in French studies. However, the impact of Abby's high school experienced carried through to her college career:

In college, I still had great difficulties relating to starting my homework. I had developed such a fear and so many negative emotions related to doing homework that I have always had a psychological blockage when I have homework to do, and it is very difficult for me to get started.

Abby did profess, however, that “time and maturity helped [her] be a better student in college,” and she predicted that “time and maturity will help [her] be an even better student someday in grad school.” Perchance, when Abby is 30, she too will have forgotten the sacrifices as has her sister.

Foust et al. (2008) wrote of the “forced choice dilemma” that AP students often faced when balancing social lives and academics. In their work with AP and IB students, Foust et al. found that the students “believed they could, and should, pursue both academic achievement and social lives, even though they needed to sacrifice sleep in order to do so” (p. 125). As seen below, some participants in this study indicated similar forced choice dilemmas. High-achieving participants often felt compelled to fill their schedules with AP courses, which supplanted opportunities to pursue potential interests both inside and outside school.

Though the interview and written reflection protocols as well as the focus group protocols asked individuals if they had made sacrifices due to their enrollment in multiple AP courses, none of the protocols specifically referenced types of sacrifices. For those participants who did report sacrifices, limited time calculated into the sacrifices they made. Although Elliott feels that any sacrifice made during high school was relatively

minor, he did make a correlation between a heavier “AP load” and the need to “cut back on [his] play time and increase [his] study time.” Both Jake and Jimmy Diesel asserted that they had “no free time,” and John suggested that he “could have had a lot more free time” if it weren’t for his course load. Perhaps the most noteworthy sacrifice, however, was that of participants’ health and happiness. Participants repeatedly mentioned odd sleeping patterns and sleep deprivation due to required course work and extracurricular commitments. Participants also addressed the effects of poor eating habits and depression. I clustered three horizons under the theme of sacrifices: (a) time with friends and family, (b) activities and interests, and (c) health and happiness.

Time with friends and family. Fifteen participants specifically mentioned sacrificing social lives or time with friends. Marcus, a 20-year-old computer programmer, artist, and student who is “interested in creating new things, new communities, and new ways of thinking,” confessed:

I suppose that taking AP classes may have impacted my social experience in high school. I don’t think I had the typical high school experience—I’m still piecing together how to “hang out” because I was so focused on working and making things in high school.

In his written reflection, Marcus gives no hint of regret for this sort of lifestyle, though.

Unlike Marcus, some participants tied their level of contentment to their social lives, or lack thereof. Evan described himself as “happiest when ...with other people, family and friends.” However, taking multiple AP courses impeded his social life: “there were many times my social life suffered when I had a lot of homework to do or a big test

to study for...schoolwork definitely interfered with things I wanted to do socially.”

Offering a more in-depth explanation, Jimmy Diesel wrote:

My social life was hugely affected by my multiple AP classes. Since I always had homework to do or a test to study for, I rarely went out with friends. I never went to parties, and I would go out to a movie with a couple of friends approximately once a month. During some of the tougher months, I would sometimes not do any social activities with my friends for two months.

Several of the respondents spoke or wrote of having more homework and less time to go out with friends particularly on weekdays. Rex reported that “there wasn’t just that time ...to kind of relax and hang out with your friends.” With the increased time she spent on her coursework, Jessica admits, “I felt I was distancing myself from my friends because of the course load.” Michael “cannot remember ever hanging out with friends much on school nights because of the amount of homework.” The other participants mentioned similar impacts on social lives and friendships.

As an outlying comment, James Franco wrote, “I was unable to participate in activities that normal teenagers experience, such as sneaking out of the house at midnight and returning at four in the morning.” Though I’m unsure of the credence he placed in the reality of these activities representing “normal” teenage behaviors, I do believe that James Franco intended to emphasize the sacrifices he made.

In addition to the reduction of social lives, eight participants pointed out that their family relationships suffered as well. James Franco wrote, “I had less time to spend with my family,” and Heath affirmed, “family time...was a sacrifice.” Ronald, who often napped after school due to exhaustion, shared:

There were times when I would get home, and I would not be able to eat dinner with my family because I was needing to sleep; and there were other times where I just didn't have time to like watch a movie with them if there were doing that or if they were playing games at night 'cause I had exams the next day. It just seemed like my life was moving really quickly, and I didn't have all that much time to spend with them.

Jane "didn't have much time during the evenings to spend leisure time with [her] family" either, so she resorted to doing "homework on the couch while they watched TV." Both Evan and Jimmy Diesel experienced strained relationships with their fathers. For these individuals, the price of their motivation to pursue rigorous courses was the sacrifice of social lives and family relationships.

Activities and interests. In addition to sacrificing time with friends and family, participants also often had to make difficult choices concerning activities and interests. Aaron, a cellist, described himself as being "fairly involved in orchestra up until the end of [his] 11th grade year," when his schedule simply did not enough practice time to keep up his performance level. As she recalled during her focus group, Anne had to choose between choir and orchestra because she "didn't have enough periods anymore to do both"; she chose orchestra. Specifically, she gave up "jazz choir," for she was able still to be involved in choir at church. Shriya also made considerable sacrifices when filling her schedule with AP courses: "The years before, I did volleyball, track, hung out with friends, and watched TV with family. When I took the AP classes, those activities were simply traded with more studying." Jessica wished she "could have done more and...explored more"; the tone of her voiced changed slightly, with a hint of wistfulness,

when she shared, “I really regret, you know, giving up playing the piano, or things like that, because I was focusing...entirely on one thing. I didn’t think I was, you know. I didn’t have that much variety in my life after awhile.” Ronald echoed Jessica’s sentiments, speculating, “Maybe I would have played basketball, maybe I would have tried like JV swimming or something along those lines, just to be a little bit more exploratory than I was.”

Not all participants gave up activities completely, though. Some played a give-and-take game among their activities and academics. Rather than giving up his involvement in music activities, Heath chose not to “get as deep” into the musical group as he would have liked due to time restraints connected to the number and type of activities in which he was involved and the rigorous course load he pursued. Instead of relinquishing involvement in music completely, Heath opted to lessen his level of involvement in one activity so that he could devote more time to another: “I would have liked to be able to focus more on music, but it just would have been impossible. Rather than sacrifice sports, I chose to sacrifice music.” Not wanting to sacrifice academic performance, as previously mentioned, Dee and John chose to place more focus on school and less on their music endeavors. Abby, who had filled her senior schedule with five AP courses also enrolled in an additional course in Sign Language through the local community college. So that she could arrive to the Sign Language course on time, she needed to leave her seventh period course, Orchestra, early. As a result, she was forced to audit Orchestra during the first semester of her senior year. Unlike those who did sacrifice activities, Jane refused to trade activities for homework; she revealed, “I would never have sacrificed my activities for higher homework quality or completion, and I

don't see any other way I could have found more time to do my work.” Jane managed to juggle her activities and homework, earning recognition in both areas and gaining admission to a selective Midwestern university.

In addition to choices related to involvement in extracurricular activities, two participants also expressed disappointment in sacrifices made in order to pursue multiple AP courses. In his blunt manner underscored by emphatic hand gestures, Kevin Elias articulated:

I did want to take another language class because I got into Latin, and it kinda sucked; so I dropped it. And I was considering taking another language class like Japanese or German or something, or even Spanish, which honestly I wish I had taken. But I also wanted to take all the AP classes I was eligible for, and so...I decided that the language class wouldn't be worthwhile because I'd only get in one year. But, you know, that did kind of suck.

Shriya also faced a difficult decision between two courses:

I had to choose whether or not I wanted to keep a Spanish course or my math course....I really liked Spanish, and I took it for the enjoyment of it...that really bummed me when I had to drop that and continue on with math.

Based on my own experiences working with high-ability and high-achieving students, I can attest that many of these students yearly weigh options between activities and academics as well as between different courses, hoping that they make decisions they will not later regret.

Health and happiness. Three participants addressed the concerns of their parents regarding their health and well-being. Jake indicated, “My mom often said she worried I

would get an ulcer or something at the pace I was going.” Heath referenced his mother’s worries that he “was not going to be okay” as well as the fact that this worry caused their relationship to be “more problematic.” When Dee’s grades dropped and she began sleeping at odd times then waking up late in the evening to do her homework, she noted her parents’ worry, admitting that her parents “probably lost sleep because of [her]” and that “they were kind of worried about [her] health.” Additionally, Dee mentioned that her “teachers were worried too,” a comment that resonated with me particularly because I often worry about the health and well-being of my own high-achieving students enrolled in multiple AP courses. Dee’s own judgment of her health is telling. Lowering her voice to almost a whisper during the focus group, Dee uttered, “I felt like I got sick more often—um, stressed—yeah—not good.”

Though I consistently took care to bracket my own experiences and beliefs while listening to and interpreting participants’ stories, I must admit being most affected by the accounts of sacrificed health and happiness. The repeated mention of health sacrifices proved a bit unsettling. In fact, after listening to Aaron recall periods of extreme stress, depression, and suicidal thoughts, I pondered in my journal: “Aaron is categorized as a 5th-year senior and certainly faces stress and uncertainty in his collegiate life. So what has changed? How has he overcome the severe issues that almost paralyzed him just a year earlier?” And more poignant thoughts came to mind after reading Ralph’s response to the sacrifices he had made; I typed:

A lump formed in my throat and a tear dropped from my eye as I read Ralph’s admission that he had sacrificed happiness....I would have never predicted the struggles that lay ahead of [a student like Ralph]. How many of my students have

sat in my classroom as talented yet timid and sometimes bewildered students?

What, if anything, could I have done?

I cannot yet answer my questions. However, I can start by acknowledging both the potentiality of existence of such severe sacrifices and my desire to better understand how the sacrifices affected individuals. If nothing else, this study begins to shed some light on the real experiences of students, as recalled by the individuals themselves.

The most common health-related sacrifice involved sleep deprivation and the development of odd sleeping habits. Conversing with one another during their focus group, Rex and Shriya both laughed when speaking of the “lack of sleep” during the time they took multiple AP courses; Shriya later recalled studying until “about 2:00 or 3:00 a.m.” for AP Biology or AP European History. Michael also wrote of his struggles “getting adequate rest...partially from the large amount of work associated with the multiple AP courses” as well as from his involvement in extracurricular activities.

Jake cited experts who “always recommend eight hours of sleep for adolescents,” then continued, “but if you were taking the ‘AP Schedule’⁶⁰ you had to settle for six hours on a good night.” James Franco felt that during the better week, he “averaged about five to six hours of sleep, which was tiring but okay”; however, during some weeks, he “averaged closer to three to four hours.” Marcus as well noted a “lack of sleep cycle.” Abby described the necessity of naps:

I slept extremely little. I often stayed up until 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. or later doing homework. As a result, many (most?) afternoons I would take a nap when I got home in order to allow me to stay up late working on my homework.

⁶⁰ Referring to the highly competitive AP track in his high school; students who followed this schedule regularly took 4+ courses during their sophomore, junior, and senior years.

Like Abby, Dee napped after school then awoke late in the evening to finish her homework. Ronald also needed naps between finishing school responsibilities and starting homework:

I would actually usually sleep right when I got home for like two or three hours, which sort of turned out to be a problem because I would like sleep through dinner with my family, and my mom wasn't particularly please with that; but it was just something that she got used to, and I really didn't have a choice since I was so tired after getting home.

Though he opted not to take naps, John admitted, "my sleep was affected...I could understand that I was staying up later and then getting up at the same time or earlier, and it didn't help." Even though these participants realized the negative effects of their sleeping habits, they perpetuated the negative effects by continuing their odd sleeping habits.

Heath and Aaron also sacrificed sleep in order to accomplish everything they set out to do each day. Describing his schedule as "jam-packed all the time," Heath provided a story to illustrate the effects of choosing not to forgo activities:

For instance, we would have Wednesday night basketball at church on a weekly basis; and regardless of the amount of work I had, I would always go. And it would mean being up until 2:00 or 3:00 some nights, but it just didn't matter. I would always go. So, I think just sleep was a general sacrifice in a very real way.

In his attempt to juggle everything in his hands, Aaron confessed:

I also developed an increasingly dangerous habit of sacrificing my health (especially in terms of sleeping patterns)...it was not uncommon for me to sleep

for three or four hours a night for the majority of the school week and attempt to make that sleep up during the weekend.

In the focus group session, Aaron estimated “averaging about three hours of sleep a night” for “two months during his senior year,” adding with a chuckle: “I have no clue how I did that.” These two individuals felt forced to choose between getting everything done and getting enough sleep; and in the end, sleep fell short.

In addition to odd sleeping habits and sleep deprivation, Abby referenced her “unusual eating habits” that she had developed while dealing with the obligations and stresses associated with multiple AP courses. She explained, “I ate very little and at strange times. Sometimes I could go 24 hours or more without eating, so I often felt weak and faint because of the lack of food.” I surmise that the irregularity and insufficiency of meals, combined with inadequate sleep, contributed significantly to her stress.

Coupled with physical health sacrifices, two participants explicitly mentioned the emotional sacrifice of happiness. When responding to the sacrifices he made, Ralph did not mention his drug addiction; instead, he wrote, “As sad as it sounds...happiness.” Ronald also mentioned sacrificing happiness: “I guess there were some days when I just felt stressed out, and I wasn’t as happy as I would have been otherwise; but it wasn’t like depression in the typical sense of the word. It was just that my life wasn’t as good as it could have been.” Alluding to the sacrifice of happiness, Jimmy Diesel divulged that he felt “sad at times.” Based upon the tone underlying the written and spoken words of Aaron, Abby, Dee, and Jake highlighted throughout this study, I speculate that they, if asked whether they sacrificed happiness, might agree. In fact, during the member check,

the aforementioned participants expressed agreement with my interpretations of their experiences.

Amid all the stress and sacrifice attributed to rigorous academic and hectic extracurricular schedules, however, the individuals participating in this study did not seem to voice any strong remorse.

Family, Friends, & Like-minded Classmates

My own experiences with high-ability and high-achieving students led me to believe that students derived some of their encouragement and assistance from those who surrounded them each day. In an e-mail responding in the affirmative to my request for study participants, a participant took some time to express his overall satisfaction with his highly selective college, particularly with his social life. Four sentences stood out: “I feel like I have a lot...in common with nearly everyone I meet here. My social circle is quite a bit bigger now. It's great. I'm really happy here.” His musings made me ponder what made his college experience different from his high school experience.

As participants summoned their memories of taking four or more AP courses concurrently, they often mentioned the impact of family, friends, and peers. Family provided fundamental support for many participants, while the support of friends and like-minded classmates, echoing references to the positive influence of peers and friends found in literature dealing with the social/emotional health of gifted adolescents (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Foust et al. 2008; Hertzog, 2003; Reis & Renzulli, 2004).

Participants' experiences supported the findings of Hammond, McBee, and Hébert (2007), which revealed that friendship among a group of students within an honors program was vital to each student' success. The same study also noted that

competition, though present, was not perceived negatively. Participants in this study indicated that peers were also a source of healthy competition: they pushed each other, consciously or not, to perform at their highest levels in the classroom.

To better understand the participants' perceptions of taking four or more AP courses during an academic year, I explored the role that family, friends, and like-minded classmates played in the participants' overall experience. I asked every participant about the impact of taking multiple AP courses on his/her family life and social life (see Appendices F, H, K, & L). Three horizons comprise this key theme: (a) duality of parent/family support, (b) social/academic support among peers, and (c) competition among peers.

Duality of parent/family support. As revealed earlier, parents and family added stress to the lives of many participants. However, parents and family also provided a fundamental support structure specifically mentioned by 15 participants. When asked how his family life was affected by taking multiple AP courses, Jake led his response by writing, "I would definitely have to thank my mom for putting up with me." Sophia described her parents as always being there to give her the "tools" she needed to succeed but also as being "kind of hands-off"; they pushed her to do her best but "couldn't care less" what classes she took. Jane's parents both encouraged her and pushed her to keep straight A's. Michael commented on his parents' desire that he "get all 'A's'" as well; however, he also identified them as "a big support" when taking all the AP classes: "they pushed me to do well, but also supported me and believed in what I could accomplish." Ronald, who often displeased his mother by sleeping through dinner, revealed that his parents would proffer support through allowing him to stay home from school in order to

make up work missed during his debate absences. After commenting on the stress caused by the troublesome relationship between him and his mother, Heath labeled both parents as “supportive.” Evan also experienced a strained relationship with his father, yet recorded that his family “helped [him] make it through the classes.”

The three siblings in the study viewed parent/family support in three distinct ways. The oldest, Anne, describes their parents as having high expectations, “but not out of proportion to...abilities.” She had to “fight” with her parents “to take four AP classes ‘cause they were worried it was going to be too much.” Her parents did not question her intellectual abilities; rather, “taking 4 AP's back then was unusual and was a big deal.” Indeed, taking four AP courses concurrently was not recommended. However, when her siblings went through high school several years later, taking four AP courses was “much more common and accepted.” Anne continued by recognizing her parents, especially her mom, as a “major support during that year.” In contrast, her younger sister Abby recalled a bit more stress stemming from her parents, conceding that her parents did “provide some mental support” but also revealing that her heavy course load “added stress” as her parents would encourage her to “give more consideration to [her] physical needs (sleep, food, etc.).” Abby related, “my father was furious every time he awoke at 2:00 a.m. and found me working on the computer.” She did not elaborate further. The youngest, Dave Gretson, made no mention of his parents other than a brief reference to his mother’s charging him for weekly cello lessons if he did not practice each day.

Three participants found particular support in their parents’ lived experiences as immigrants who worked hard to come to the United States. Even though Elliott’s parents

“often berated [him] for prioritizing incorrectly,” due to his habit of putting fun before assignments, Elliott expressed admiration towards his parents:

When I did have issues, talking to my parents helped a lot. What they had to accomplish to come to the United States from China was much, much more difficult than my situation, so I was always humbled by their stories. Their experiences always renewed my motivation to objectively evaluate my situation and to work harder.

Evidence of his parents’ inspiration can be further seen in his self-description “as a determined worker” who values “keeping perspective” on his life.

Similarly, Jimmy Diesel professed, “My parents are the only thing that kept me from hating my life.” Granted, his parents emphasized the importance of education and hard work:

Ever since I was four years old, my parents made me do workbooks for one hour a day, and later two hours a day, until I was getting enough homework that I could not continue to do workbooks. The workbooks were organized by the child’s age and subject (math, grammar, reading comprehension, writing, etc.). Throughout my life, I have been lectured on the importance of hard work by my father, who went from a poor boy in a small village in India to a successful cardiologist by working incredibly hard academically. Therefore, I was quite used to working hard by the time I was in high school, and I stopped caring for the present enjoyments of life and started caring about the future.

While some teenagers may have resented their parents for pushing academics, Jimmy Diesel’s written reflection harbors no resentment. Rather, he credited his father with

complete financial support and his mother with emotional support. Moreover, he expressed his understanding and agreement with their parenting. Indeed, it appears that if Jimmy Diesel had tackled the rigorous course load without his parents' high expectations and support, he might have resented his experiences.

Sam also displayed great respect for his parents in describing their expectations and their impact. Sam describes himself as coming "from a family that was born and raised in the populous and poor portions of India." His mother "resided in the busy streets of Mumbai"; his father "lived in a tiny village miles away." He explained,

As any set of Asian parents raises their children, they highlight one key point in life: be successful. I can always remember my father telling me in my native tongue, "I brought us to the Americas so it is your job to prosper in it." It has become my duty to reach this sort of success working for a strong education, pursuing a professional position, and receiving recognition for outstanding works.

Sam's words did not surprise me, though, as he appeared to be a driven and industrious student in high school, taking rigorous courses and involving himself in numerous activities. Furthermore, he clarified, "it was normal and acceptable for me to have only short interactive moments with my family from day to day." Both he and his parents understood the importance of hard work, and Sam wished for nothing more than to make his parents proud of his work.

Other participants whose parents immigrated to the United States also noted both pressure to perform as well as high levels of support. In China, James Franco's "father was a computer science professor and...mother an obstetrician/gynecologist." Coming to the United States to further their educations, his father earned a doctorate in Industrial

Engineering and his mother earned master's degrees in both Statistics and Nutrition.

James Franco described his parents as graduating “at the top of their classes” and expecting the same from him. Seemingly unfazed by the high expectations, James Franco wrote,

My family, especially, provided the most help. For example, I could always choose what we had for dinner; even if we didn't have the ingredients available, my parents would go out and buy them just for that one meal. Dinners were always cooked entirely from scratch; no takeout or pizzas or fast food, ever. The fact that they were demanding meant that they had trust in me and cared about me, and that mattered more than anything else. Some of the things in Amy Chua's recent book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*⁶¹, remind me of my high school experiences for sure.

His family supported his heavy course load and made it his “sole responsibility...to be a ‘good student’.”

Jessica and her parents also moved to the United States from China in order to provide the best opportunity for their daughter. Jessica, an only child, often translated for her parents once she grasped the English language as an elementary student. Working hard as one of the youngest students in her AP Language and Composition class, Jessica stood out as an eloquent writer and as a top performer. In my field notes, I recalled being “particularly impressed” by the fact that “Jessica was once considered an ELL student.” Jessica characterized her parents as “supportive” as well, especially her mother, “because she's the one who pushed” Jessica to take five AP courses during her junior year. Jessica explained:

⁶¹ Chua, A. (2011). *Battle hymn of the tiger mother*. New York: Penguin Press.

If it were up to me, I would've probably taken four, and you know, the extra one I would have taken my senior year. But...she knew that I could do it; and she made sure that when I when I worked...I always had my private space, and she wouldn't disturb me...She was always there for me.

Jessica conceded that her parents sometimes gave her stress, but looking straight at me, she emphasized, "they were also there for me...they made sure I could get enough sleep...they really did their best...to accommodate everything in my life."

John, also an only child, moved from India to the United States at age 8. Both parents hold doctorate degrees: his father in Divinity, and his mother both in Zoology⁶² and in Education. John felt his parents expected him "to be doing really well in every class" he took, which created stress. And his primary response to stress was to "become the hermit and be very inclusive and not really let it out." At this point, his parents often stepped in, letting him "expose" his feelings and encouraging him by repeating, "You know you can do this; you can do this." John expressed gratitude that his parents allowed him to "vent" his frustrations and support his efforts.

Many participants indicated that parents or family played a dual role of supporters and stressors; however, some named parents or family only as sources of stress. Kevin Elias mentioned his parents twice, tensing up each time and running his hand through his thick, blond, wavy, shag-cut hair: once in reference to their refusal to pay for AP exams, and once in reference to their concern that he "need[ed] to care" about his grades. Each time, his voice shifted in tone to mimic, a bit derisively, the way they sounded in his ear. Combined with knowledge of his struggles with family relationships as well as with

⁶² Later, during the focus group, John indicated that his mother's doctorate was in "endocrinology or something." This doctoral degree was earned in India, while his mother's doctorate in education was earned in the United States.

academic performance during his senior year, I interpreted his nonverbal actions as indicative of residual stress. Aaron described his family life as being “detrimentally affected” during his senior year, which he attributes largely to two main factors: first, the “large amounts of time” that he spent in his bedroom working or studying; and second, his coming out as a bisexual. Though Aaron’s parents “often wished that they could spend more time” with him, he explained that they felt “guilty” about interrupting his studying. He continued, writing “after I graduated from high school, both my mother and my stepfather stated that they were glad I was done with high school, because it removed a major source of stress and conflict.”

Social/academic support among peers. As discussed earlier, several of the participants spoke or wrote of additional homework studying for exams resulting in less time to spend with friends. Several participants mentioned feeling overloaded or burned out as a result of the increased rigor. At the same time, many participants pointed out how their peers and friends in the AP courses provided different levels of support and camaraderie. Characterizing the camaraderie found in his AP courses, Sam wrote, “AP courses introduced me to a diverse population of unique students. Each student had a different personality and exclusive traits; the one thing that we all had in common was a drive in education.” Kevin Elias confessed, “I’d talk to people inside the class that I’d never talk to outside of class...really cool people, and I honestly wish I’d kept up on some of those friendships ‘cause there were some pretty awesome people in my classes.”

The need for social/academic support among gifted peers is supported by the work of Assouline and Colangelo (2006) as well as Hammond et al. (2007). Of the 24 participants in this study, 20 mentioned the importance of social/academic support among

peers. Jake found “refuge” in having “a lot of friends outside of the AP lifestyle,” in order to avoid the stress common among “kids living the AP life.” Anne, Sophia, and Shriya also specifically mentioned the influence of friends outside their AP courses. Having “a lot of friends outside in volleyball and choir and orchestra and dance” made Anne feel that they reflected “separate lives” from her AP life. While taking part in her activities, Anne didn’t focus on work a lot; rather, in her “private time” or “home time,” she completed her homework. When talking about her friends during the interview, Sophia classified them into two groups: the “nerdy friends” in her AP class with whom she was “really good friends” and the “rather unintelligent” friends who were “cool and fun to hang out with.” She continued, “the people that weren’t the nerdy people didn’t really know anything about how nerdy I was.” The separation of friend groups allowed Sophia to lead separate lives as well. Shriya also spoke of having different friends from different activities and that not all of these friends “were friends with each other,” permitting her to have “more groups to go with and belong.” These four participants were able to balance their separate social lives in such a way that enhanced their own high school experience.

In contrast, when Jennifer’s good friend she had met while participating in her school’s synchronized swimming team asked her to hang out on a weeknight, Jennifer remembers feeling surprised: “and she would actually, you know, hang out with her friends on weeknights; and up until then, I had never understood that people did that.” Jennifer determined that her friend was “still working hard and taking good classes,” but her friend did not have the same heavy homework load as did Jennifer. Prior to this moment, Jennifer had not viewed her two hours of homework per AP class each night as

being extraordinary. She could not relate to her friend's schedule, nor could her friend relate to hers.

In her younger years, Jennifer had been labeled as “the nerd” and “the smart kid,” labels that made her feel different and that made others assume she didn't want “to hang out and stuff.” When she started attending the urban, regional academy designed to accommodate high-ability and high-achieving students, she found it “very welcoming” because no one was singled out as “the smart kid”—everyone there was smart too. At the regional high school, Jennifer and her friends would “help each other on assignments...study together...do things over lunch and talk about teachers—kind of blow off steam.” Without her friends at the regional academy, she believed her rigorous AP schedule “would have been more difficult.” Like Jennifer, Shriya bonded with her AP classmates because “no one ridiculed one person...of taking advanced classes.” In fact, “having friends in the same AP classes...made it more fun...everyday.”

The majority of participants who addressed friendships and social connections emphasized the value of similar schedules and similar experiences. Abby found an important “support network” in her school's talented and gifted program. This program allowed students identified as gifted to meet as a class for one period every other day. Most students in this program had “challenging schedules, and Abby “was able to talk with people who had similar situations” as hers. Twelve years after graduating high school, Anne remembered that “there was definitely a group of students” at her high school “who were taking similar courses and had similar goals.” As a result, she never felt that different, and she always could “commiserate with them when things got bad, and they actually understood.” Even her younger brother Dave Gretson, who did not “feel

the need of a support system,” found “the closest thing [to a support system]” in his friend who was in three of five Dave’s AP courses “as well as one or two other courses.”

Eighteen participants made direct references to their peers in AP courses. John noticed that his friend group changed mostly to people in his AP classes because they understood the need to trade hanging out with homework. Looking back, John and his AP friends “felt like [they] just battled through the trenches” together, which made the celebration “amazing.” James Franco described his friends as ranging “from those on the soccer team to those in debate”; however, he later indicated that the majority of his friends “were also taking multiple AP courses.” As for the impact of these friends, James noted that the people he met and the friendships he made “were more than worth the stress and challenges.” For Jessica, her comfort came in “just having someone else who understands what you’re going through” and in the ability to complain to each other. Rex compared his friends with “relief wells,” giving him “a chance to...have therapeutic discussions” with people to whom he could relate and who could relate to him.

In particular, the academic support from camaraderie felt within the AP courses that participants experienced aligned with the social-emotional support provided by the same camaraderie. Evan wrote, “My closest group of friends and I would get together and do homework so that we could all understand it well.” Elliott had “at least a few good friends in every AP class,” and he recollected the ease with which he and his friends would make “social situations out of academic ones through study sessions, etc.” Sam also made sure to have “friends from each AP course”; together, they “made a strong effort to work together to finish homework...take notes, and study for tests.” After all, Sam assured, “two heads are better than one, but a group of heads is the best thing I had.”

As previously clarified, six participants in this study were inaugural members of their school's Honors Program. The program's requirements were designed so that students could progress through high school as a sort of cohort, sharing similar classes and experiences. Michael acknowledged that "all students in the Honors Program helped each other get through tough assignments or study for tests." Ronald found his "best friend" in the Honors Program and also stated, "probably the biggest support structure was actually the kids who are also going through all those classes." Five of the six openly described the program's social benefits. Additionally, Evan, also a member of the Honors Program, noted in his written reflection that he and his "closest group of friends" would do their homework together. Since Evan was also a member of the cohort who took courses together, I can suppose that this group included fellow cohort members.

Ronald's best friend Heath stated, "my classes were central to my social life in a lot of ways." Through the Honors Program, he established friendships: "I would have considered them acquaintances before the Honors Program, and friends in and after the Honors Program, after the AP classes." Though Heath had friends "via sports outside the Honors Program a little bit," he didn't "spend nearly as much time with them." With his Honors Program friends, Heath disclosed:

We didn't hesitate to talk about school, even when we weren't at school...it was a big part of our lives, honestly. And...we tended not to do completely mindless things, I guess. I mean the type of stuff we did was intellectual, often. The board games we would play would have a lot of strategy in them.

Heath relied on his best friend Ronald for not only academic but also emotional support. He related, "It was not abnormal for us to spend two of those three hours on the phone,

talking about homework, talking about life, but doing our assignments together on the phone.”

During the second focus group session, three of the participants were members of the initial Honors Program cohort. When asked how social lives and friendships were impacted during the time they took four or more AP courses, their responses reflected the influence of their Honors Program. Aaron smiled slightly and described:

For instance, in my year, along with Dee’s and Ronnie’s⁶³, there were 10 of us that went through the same classes together, in addition to like seminar classes. We were, for the most part, in the same actual class section. So for instance, we all took AP Calc and AP physics and whatnot together our senior year. So I think there was a lot of camaraderie there, and we were able to...work together and work off of each other.

Ronald jumped in to agree with Aaron. A bit later, Dee added, “It was more like a friendly atmosphere ...people were always willing to help if you asked them questions...I did make a lot of friends in my class⁶⁴. Like I felt all my friends were in my class.”

Indeed, for these participants, enrollment in the Honors Program significantly shaped the character of their friendships in high school. Overall, the reflections of the participants in this study implied that they developed and nurture friendships within their AP courses in order to develop a support network.

Competition among peers. While coding and recoding the interview transcripts and written reflections, one word mentioned by two candidates repeatedly caught my eye. Both Heath and James Franco mentioned the idea of competition among AP students.

⁶³ Ronald assigned himself a nickname during the focus group session.

⁶⁴ Dee was referring to the Honors Program cohort.

When asked how he defined and measured success, Heath brought up “competition” or “being on track” with peers in terms of grades. Characterizing himself as a “pretty competitive person,” he went on, “if I was doing significantly worse than the people around me, then that would have been a problem.” Responding to the written protocol question concerning stress (see Appendix H), James Franco wrote,

Stress came in the form of tests and competition. We all wanted to be accepted top schools, and we knew that a single poor test score could ruin our grades in a particular class. As a result, there was a healthy amount of sabotaging and backstabbing among AP students.”

Yet, his next response regarding the impact of said stress contradicted the negative effects: “I welcomed the stress and competition. I would have been far more disappointed had there been no competition and nothing at stake.” Neither the interview nor the written reflection protocols used the term *competition*; therefore, I was a bit intrigued by the emergence of the term in two different contexts—positive and negative—and from individuals who had attended two different high schools. I wished to explore the idea further. I added the following sub-question to the focus group protocol: “Was there a spirit of camaraderie or competition among classmates? Explain.” I wanted to hear how these high-achieving participants might view competition within their AP coursework.

For the most part, this competition was viewed as healthy. During the focus group sessions, seven participants addressed the idea of competition. Speaking to the two other members of his focus group, Rex, “among my group of friends, there was a sense of competitiveness...It was always fairly good natured; it didn’t get really serious.” Shriya concurred, “it was friendly competition.” Anne agreed that “for the most part...it was

good”; however, she related a personal experience that illustrated the negative side of competition: “I can think of that one specific person that I thought was my friend and didn’t realize how competitive she was.... When I was voted, ‘Most Intelligent Female’ by my classmates, that was the end of our friendship.”

The second focus group, in particular, detailed the nature of competition more fully. Addressing the Honors Program specifically, Aaron started, “I also think it was competitive but not universally... I was very competitive with some other people in the Honors Program, especially in math and physics, so we would kind of push ourselves to try harder in that.” Clarifying further, Ronald added:

I don’t really think that the kind of competition that existed for people who are taking four or more AP classes was a bad kind of competition. It was generally a competition, like a lighthearted between friends, and it almost seemed like just as mundane and normal as like competing over a basketball game that you’re playing.... I guess that we realized that the score was a little more important, but it was never like you actually wanted someone to fail.... You were pushing each other to try to achieve. Like I would say my best friend at the time was another student in the Honors Program, and I think that we were probably like the most competitive with each other than with anyone else; but it was a very positive experience.

Though graduating before the Honors Program existed, Sophia interjected via Skype:

I would agree with both of you actually.... My classmates and I didn’t study to beat ourselves.... Or the idea that someone did better than you on an exam didn’t necessarily motivate you to do more, but it was definitely something that we all

talked about and like shot the shit about when we...got our exams back. We'd be like, "Hey yeah, I got a 95!" "Oh you're a jerk; I got a 93."

At this point, the entire focus group chuckled simultaneously, perhaps due to her frank language or perhaps due to the resonating truth behind her words. Then Sophia continued: "So it was definitely the topic of conversation because it was very much the one thing that we all had in common with each other." But the good-natured competition did not prevent Sophia and her AP friends from calling each other when they needed help, for "there was very open communication lines [*sic*]" among them.

John followed Sophia talking about the existence of camaraderie among those in his AP courses and taking a moment to address competition as well:

There was a good sense of competition because in each AP class there was probably like one person that...just got the subject better than someone else. Then that person...in another class...might not get that material at all. So it was helpful for me to see that people have different elements, and people have different interests.

Dee confirmed John's remarks, "It wasn't like cut-throat or people weren't competing for like the only A in the class...people were always willing to help if you asked them questions."

Though I would have liked to hear more about the prevalence of competition, or lack thereof, among students who take multiple AP courses concurrently, I discovered that competition had a more positive connotation among participants who responded than a negative connotation.

Coping Strategies

While research suggests that students identified as intellectually gifted students use problem-solving strategies more proficiently to cope with stress than those who are not (Preuss & Dubow, 2004; Tannenbaum, 2003), this research does not address how high-achieving students negotiate the stress connected to taking multiple AP courses. Indeed, participants often cited peers, friends, family, and teachers as support structures while they took multiple AP courses concurrently. These support structures served as sounding boards, empathizers, counselors, cheerleaders, and advocates.

When settling upon the phenomenon of how taking four or more AP courses impacted the lives of high school students, I hoped to gain a better understanding not only of the stresses the students recalled facing but also of the coping strategies they developed. During the first round of data collection—interviews and written reflections—I did not use the term *cope* in any variation within the protocols. Instead, I used the phrase *support structure* to gather a better idea of how participants interpreted the question (see Appendices F & H).

As surmised from the previous presented data, peers and friends as well as family were often mentioned as primary support structures to deal with the stress of their schedules and of the expectations. In addition, some participants identified several other specific actions that they employed in attempts to cope with the stresses they encountered. In particular, Ralph indicated that he “didn’t have any resources to cope with stress and anxiety.” Furthermore, he revealed, “I think it was for this reason that my drug abuse started and escalated.” Ralph’s disclosure caused me to further examine the coping strategies that participants identified. I subsequently labeled strategies as healthy

and unhealthy, based on the participants' admission as well as on the reported short-term and long-term effects on the participants' health.

In order to learn more about coping strategies in particular, I choose to include the specific term in the focus group protocol, as seen below:

Participants have mentioned a variety of coping strategies to deal with the stresses they faced during the time of 4+ AP courses. Even though you may have mentioned coping strategies earlier, please share a little more about the coping strategies—both those that you consider healthy and those you consider unhealthy—that you developed during this time.

In addition to the people in their lives, participants cited other healthy coping strategies: physical activity, extracurricular involvement, religious activities, time management skills, and taking breaks from the routine of studying and hurried schedules. There was a fine line, however, between taking breaks and avoiding work altogether. The dual nature of avoidance, or procrastination, as adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies is supported by the recent research of Schraw, Wadkins, and Olafson (2007) as well as Suldo, Shaunessy, Michalowski et al. (2008). The unhealthy coping strategy of avoidance manifested in the lives of several participants, which resulted in serious health risks. The participants' reflections on the consequences of their unhealthy coping strategies bring awareness to the necessity of emotional support for students struggling to balance their course load, their extracurricular activities, and their lives in general.

Through the two focus group sessions, I was able to flush out strategies participants exercised while enrolled in four or more AP courses concurrently. These

coping strategies collectively can be separated into three horizons: (a) people, (b) unhealthy habits, and (c) healthy habits.

People. The prevalence of peers, friends, and family listed as support structures did not come as a complete surprise, for I've often heard students in my AP classroom refer to the aforementioned as sources of assistance and of strength. While the previous theme—Family, friends, and like-minded classmates—did address the ways in which these people served as supports in participants' lives, I wish to highlight a few ways in which family and friends filled this role.

Though family sometimes caused stress in participants' lives, 15 individuals referred to parents as support structures during their rigorous academic schedules. Most notably, as presented earlier, Jimmy Diesel credits his parents with “the only thing that kept [him] from hating life” during this stressful time. James Franco respected his parents' high expectations and appreciated their willingness to accommodate even his meal choices. Jane found her schedule so full that she often considered spent family “leisure time” sitting on the couch and doing homework while they watched TV. Sometimes though, during periods of high stress, Jane's mother would step in: “my mom would make me sit on the couch without my homework and watch TV with her, after it was clear I was as stressed as I could be.” When she was “freaking out,” Sophia asked her mother to talk her down. Also providing emotional support, Michael felt that his parents helped him to “understand the importance of working hard academically and in taking these classes.” Other participants referred to the general support of parents and family.

As noted earlier, a primary coping strategy materializing in the participants' perceptions was their proclivity for making friends in their AP courses. The majority of participants, all but four, pointed out the support of peers and friends during their journey through a rigorous AP schedule. Sharing his experiences with friends, Rex wrote:

Spending time with friends was probably the most beneficial as it gave me a chance to voice my frustrations and have a therapeutic discussion with people I could relate to and who could relate to me. Shared arduous experiences are definitely easier to deal with than solo missions.

As pointed out earlier, a majority of participants found assistance and support among peers and friends in their AP courses

Some participants also noted the support of peers and friends outside their AP lives. Kevin Elias found that “going to my church youth group” provided needed support; he elaborated, “I’ve been with those guys for so long, and they know me really, really well.” Closely related to supportive people is the ability to engage in conversation. Participants often spoke of the support they derived from talking with classmates, peers, family, and teachers. However, Heath, not wanting to “fudge other things” as support structures, made a habit of actively talking with others: “It was always just conversations...when it comes down to it, talking was the main, pretty much the only thing.”

In addition, peers and friends did not limit themselves to providing only academic support. Kevin Elias, stretching back in his chair, talked about his friends who did not necessarily provide any support for “the academic stuff”; instead they:

...were just kind of keeping me in line, kicking my butt, keeping me from, you

know, completely going over one edge or the other, of like too much work or too much lazy...keeping me going, not getting me depressed, you know, stuff like that, 'cause I was going through a lot of mental stuff.

Truthfully, I didn't know. Kevin Elias had admitted earlier that he struggled a bit during his senior year, but I had made the assumption at the time that his struggles were due to his taking six AP courses and not having the time to complete all his homework.

Aaron also struggled tremendously during his senior year but was able to find much needed "psychological support" in friends and teachers, which he described as his "only truly effective measure to deal with stress." His written reflection further revealed the disquieting reality that the help he received from friends and teachers "was likely the deciding factor in preventing multiple attempts at suicide." Responding to the focus group question about coping strategies, Aaron emphasized the role of his teachers: "the only reason I really finished senior year successfully was based on a bunch of teachers helping me through it." Michael, Shriya, and John, who attended the same high school as Aaron, also mentioned the supportive nature of their teachers. Michael found his teachers "very willing to discuss any problems with the workload. One of his teachers in particular "would ask...when tests/papers were due and attempt to find a date for...tests that would not conflict with those days." Shriya also recalled that some of her teachers "would take into account what other AP tests were going on, and they would schedule...tests for whenever other tests weren't going on." She continued, "that really helped when teachers actually cared about your other courses that you were taking." When taking multiple AP courses, John felt himself reaching out to teachers more as well.

Taking time to send an e-mail following her interview, Jennifer wished to differentiate her two high school experiences, particularly in regard to her teachers. Jennifer “felt a lot of support” from the teachers at the urban, regional academy⁶⁵ she attended part-time during her freshman through junior year:

They know their students are there to get into top tier colleges and to do well on the AP exams. They know what is going to be on the exams and they give their students all of the tools they need to succeed.

Jennifer did not feel the same support from the teachers at the suburban high school she attended full-time her senior year—the same high school referenced in the previous paragraph. Based upon her younger brother’s experiences as an eighth grader starting the suburban district’s Honors Program, she wanted to warn that the teachers seem to be “scaring...students out of taking higher level courses by emphasizing how difficult the courses.” In contrast, her teachers at the regional academy “gave off the vibe that what we were doing was normal and did not talk about us like we were doing something exceptional or strange.” Thus, the teachers who treated AP courses and the students taking them as “normal” became a much stronger support structure in Jennifer’s life.

Healthy habits. In addition to supportive people in their lives, some participants shared specific habits that helped them to cope with the stress of taking four or more AP courses concurrently. Four individuals found relief in physical activity. John identified “physical activity” as the “only stress relieving technique [he] knew.” He elaborated, “I just went on like runs or did something that just got my mind off it.” Evan also found that “working out” was “the best stress relief.” Though Ralph first indicated that he did not

⁶⁵ This regional academy provides rigorous educational opportunities specifically for high-ability and high-achieving students.

have any support structures, he later wrote, “Exercise was important.” Likewise, Shriya used her involvement in sports “as an outlet to relieve stress.”

Connected to physical activity, four participants found coping benefits in their involvement in sports-related extracurricular activities. With emphasis, Jane wrote, “I LOVE playing both volleyball and golf, and my success in those sports helped alleviate the stress from the demands of my classes.” In his athletic practices, Jake found “brief respite” from the grind of academics: “For me, I counted practices as my free time. They were actually more of a relief than a chore because they were the one time of the day I didn’t have to worry about school.” As captain of her golf team senior year, Sophia explained, “at least when I was out there working on my golf swing and you know, helping other people with their swings and practicing and playing,... I didn’t have to think about school.” Jennifer, “swimming back and forth” during practice, could “process” what was going on in her life at the time.

Whether or not sports-related, school related extracurricular activities provided coping strategies. On top of the benefits of swimming, Jennifer also found that “band was a way to get the creative juices flowing to kind of get away from the strict structure of everything.” Jennifer’s next statement summarized the sentiment of escaping some of the mental stresses related to AP coursework: “I think it was good that I was involved in other things to kind of get my mind off of that and have a time in the day when I didn’t have to think about everything.”

Although she actively participated in school-related extracurricular activities, Sophia found stress relief in outside activities as well. In particular, Sophia enjoyed spending time with her horses: “just like being around with your animals, specifically

horses, can be...very relaxing and enjoyable like for me personally...that was definitely a coping method, as far as thinking everything was alright with the world.” Growing more animated, she added, “yeah, I definitely thing that helped me probably throughout my whole high school, but definitely when I was stressed out.” In fact, even now, Sophia takes every opportunity to spend time with her horses. On the morning of her interview, she took time to visit her horses because she hadn’t “gotten to see them in a couple of weeks.”

While involvement in extracurricular and outside activities allowed the participants above to escape from the stress of their AP course load, several participants reported other healthy ways to escape the stress, even if only for awhile. Despite the prevalence of unhealthy strategies in his life, Ralph indicated “leisure reading and movies” as providing a break from the stress. Jessica found some reprieve in watching TV: “I remember watching, even with the little time I had,...a couple of my favorite shows.” While Jessica found a little time to escape in the evening, John made a practice of getting up a bit earlier than his classmates:

I actually didn’t do anything school related, but I used to get all of my things that were like “me time” in the day before school, and then so after school I could just focus on schoolwork and then kind of start the cycle again.

Scheduling time to take a break from the routine allowed these individuals to renew their bodies and minds before returning to their demanding schedules.

Kevin Elias found particular satisfaction in sitting down and writing a novel during National Novel Writing Month, even though this action also interfered with his schoolwork. In a tone that was simultaneously droll and cynical, Kevin articulated:

I always feel better after...being able to sit down and put a lot of time into something and then say, “Hey, you know I did this...Suck it world, I did this in addition to not dying!” That definitely, you know, kind of got my spirits up a little bit even though it kind of screwed me over in the short run.

The immediate effects of devoting hours and hours of his time outside of school to writing a novel resulted in a downturn of academic performance; however, Kevin Elias counted more profit than loss from the experience. At that particular point in his life, Kevin Elias was “going through a lot of like mental stuff”; therefore, the ability to create something and call it his own proved emotionally beneficial.

Ronald’s primary coping strategy might also appear unhealthy without his explanation. Despite his lengthy list of absences due to debate tournament travel, Ronald found particular relief in skipping additional days of school. In his interview, he narrated:

One of the most effective things was actually not going to school some days.

There were days after debate tournaments where I might not have been feeling the best, but I was definitely feeling well enough to go to school, and I just decided not to because I felt that a lot of my time at school was wasted actually....There were a lot of classes where I felt like I could have learned what we learned in class in like 10 minutes, and then I could have gotten work done on other things at the same time, which contributed to the amount of times that I was gone senior year....For me, with the exception of having to learn complex mathematics concepts and physics concepts, I really didn’t struggle with content. It was again just getting things done, so it was nice to be able to have that as well.

He defended his strategy further during the focus group, adding that his parents allowed him to stay home.

John and Rex both indicated a particular mindset that helped them to cope with the stress. Religion played a strong role in John's life, not only as something his parents encouraged but also as something he turned to. Explaining the impact of his spiritual life, John asserted during his interview:

My faith was one thing that actually probably got stronger through it...one thing that kept me going was like realizing maybe there's a bigger plan in life and even if I did get something that I didn't want, it would work out.

Instead of referencing faith, Rex described the attitude he developed to members of his focus group:

I just kind of refused to be stressed...even though things might have piled up, and I might have a lot on my plate, I kind of...I don't know how I do it, but kind of put it in the background and say, "Okay, well, whatever. Just go and do it, and it will be done, and that's all you've got to do."

Though he made it sound simple, Rex admitted, "It's a really active thing, 'cause you've really got to try at it." Rex felt that this attitude made him "stronger" in that he learned to "deal with problems" himself rather than "looking to some external source for answers."

Though Rex implied that he applied his strategy to completing his coursework, only three participants mentioned productive strategies that directly related to their study habits. By his senior year, Evan had learned to do "homework right after school" then give himself "the rest of the night to relax and enjoy." I must interject, however, that he had previously indicated involvement in many extracurricular activities and had written,

“doing the bare minimum of homework took four or five hours a night.” Therefore, I cannot accurately define the duration of “the rest of the night.” Shriya expressed that she “was okay with studying and preparing for class multiple days before, not just the day before.” Ever looking for a challenge, Marcus revealed, “I think the secret for me was finding ways to keep interested in the material.” He continued:

In AP history courses, for example, I was able to retain a large amount of the information from the reading because I really enjoyed the subject. AP Chemistry was a struggle for me because I couldn’t find an application. I like to do or make things with the things I learn.

When unable to maintain interest, however, Marcus admitted to slacking off during the school year, although not to the detriment of his AP examination scores.

Unhealthy habits. As can be expected in almost any situation involving stress, not all participants employed healthy coping strategies. As discussed earlier, multiple participants remarked on their odd sleeping habits, which resulted in diminished health. More worrisome, however, are the coping strategies mentioned that severely affected quality of life. In the two most severe cases, participants’ selected coping strategy proved life-threatening. Ralph, now 22, wrote that he “didn’t have any resources to cope with stress and anxiety,” even though he subsequently mentioned exercise, leisure reading, and movies. These healthy strategies, however, are overshadowed by his turning to drugs as a form of escape. He deemed, “I think it was for this reason that my drug abuse started and escalated.” Four years younger than Ralph, Aaron also faced significant struggles associated with stress and anxiety, primarily associated with both the demands of his AP

schedule as well as the personal issues he faced at that time. Not yet a year removed from the worst of his struggles, Aaron wrote:

In dealing with these problems, I used ultimately counterproductive coping strategies. It seems as if I tried to ignore the problem's existence until it accumulated to a point at which it both could no longer be ignored or easily escaped, which caused substantial issues.

These “substantial issues” involved severe depression, self-mutilation, and suicidal feelings. The idea of escape was common to all unhealthy habits mentioned: the individual searched for any means to escape the stress and anxiety he or she was experiencing.

Not all unhealthy coping strategies mentioned developed into severe health consequences; however, all these strategies involved avoidance. Sam was unable to participate in a focus group; however, he still gave his input via a written response to a focus group protocol designed for written reflections (see Appendix L). Considering himself a fairly relaxed individual, Sam declared that he was “never stressed during his AP years”: however, he was at times “overwhelmed by the amount of work.” In reply to the specific question regarding coping strategies, Sam submitted, “Probably the worst coping strategy that I had was procrastination. Somehow, I had convinced myself that putting myself under lots of pressure would help me finish tasks with greater finesse. Not exactly true in hindsight.”

Other participants cited forms of procrastination as well. Aaron wrote, “Superficially, ‘relaxing’ activities such as reading, watching movies, or listening to

music would help the stress, but were only temporary; they only put off the issue, which seemed to inevitably come back as more prominent.” Dee told her focus group,

I’m the type of person who if there’s something that I need to do and if it’s really big or really scary, I don’t want to do it. So I was kind of running away from all of my stress. I didn’t want to do any of it.

The avoidance strategies of classmates Aaron and Dee involved self-isolation as well.

Aaron stated, “I pretty much just like tried to work independently on everything and refused to ask for help because I felt I should know how to like do this problem or solve this thing or do whatever.” Though Dee had taken refuge in her activities and friends, when she encountered her more severe periods of stress, she shared, “I just kind of stopped going to a lot of my other activities, I guess, like church. I didn’t go to church as often.” While Rex did utilize healthy coping strategies, he also disclosed his tendency to procrastinate. He found that he “wasted a lot of time doing unimportant things.” If not wasting time, then an alternate strategy Rex used to “preoccupy” himself was to “really fall into [his] extracurricular stuff” because “it seemed kind of more fun.” In retrospect, though, Rex understands that he “kind of used that as a way to just kind of ignore school.”

Ultimately, these methods of escape and avoidance did not result in the disappearance of the stress, as these participants learned. At some point, either during the time they took four or more AP courses concurrently or years later, each participant grasped the negative consequences of their unhealthy coping strategies. Through participants’ lived experiences, it became evident that their attempts at finding suitable support structures and coping strategies underscored the idea of balancing their lives.

Balance

Early in my reflexive journal, even before submitting my proposal, I had written that I wanted to “hear,” through the participants’ lived experiences, “how they interpret their AP experiences, particularly how they balanced their lives.” I wanted to be cautious, however, not to impose the idea upon participants or to assume that any semblance of balance existed in their lives. Consequently, I purposefully avoided the term *balance* in all interview and written reflection protocols (see Appendices F & H).

I had bracketed this idea, attributing it to my own experiences with students until the term *balance* emerged unexpectedly during my fourth interview, causing me to ponder the implications of the word. Jessica had just returned from a summer abroad experience in Japan and had agreed to sit for an interview prior to leaving for her sophomore year at a highly selective university. During the interview, I had jotted the word “balance” multiple times while taking rough field notes; in the subsequent typed field notes, I included a line that she had mentioned the word “several times.” The idea first appeared after I asked if she would “recommend that others follow the same route” as she travelled while in high school. Though she hesitated to convince someone to follow the same route, she would want to go back and tell herself to “balance out the coursework with something that you’re passionate about.”

I also noted that we had chatted a bit more after the recorder had been turned off and that she had again used the term “balance” to describe her post-high school experiences. She allowed me to turn on the recorder again momentarily so that I could capture some of her thoughts. Specifically, I wrote in my field notes that she:

...learned that she finds more fulfillment and “success” in being able to do her best and to enjoy life than in devoting everything to her studies and taking the most difficult courses just to say that she took the course.

Jessica’s thoughts prompted me to look more closely at the transcripts and written reflections, in search of the concept of *balance*, if not the term itself.

In their research, Suldo, Shaunessy, Michalowski, et al. (2008) identified balanced lives as a significant coping strategy among students in the IB program. Foust et al. (2008) questioned whether the students interviewed experienced a “Superstudent Syndrome,” characterized by students feeling “pressured to fulfill the multiple roles of high-achieving student and successful social being, without support or tools to balance” these roles (p. 126). The same question applies to the participants of the current study. With so many desires, obligations, and pressures pulling students in all directions as they pursued multiple AP courses, I was not surprised that participants in this study suggested the concept of *balance*, both implicitly and explicitly, throughout their recollections.

Both concept and term did emerge within the transcripts and reflections. In an earlier interview, Kevin Elias alluded to balance when he answered the same question as Jessica: “I think you just want to stay within...like a little bit too much stress or a little bit too little stress, as long as you’re not, you know, going to one extreme or the other, you’re probably going to be fine.” Other participants mentioned their struggles to complete homework requirements, to fulfill extracurricular obligations, to spend time with family and friends, and to find time to enjoy life. When submitting his written reflection, Evan commented, “I had to balance having a girlfriend with getting good grades, working out, participating in activities, and keeping myself in check

emotionally.” Looking back, though, Evan felt that his struggle to balance only made him “stronger as a person.” He wrote, “My dad and I have a strong relationship again, I have a lot of friends now, I have a girlfriend currently, and I ended up getting a varsity letter in swimming anyway.”

Jane also expressed satisfaction with her ability to balance elements of her life, writing, “Managing the combination of stresses during my senior year and finishing all of my activities successfully proved to me that it’s worth it to have a balance in my life.” Also, in an e-mail response to a request for participation, Ronald volunteered information, without any prompt, about his first year at college, writing:

I’ve actually been able to balance social life with academics a lot more than I did in high school. I guess it’s just naturally easier in college to find time to hang out with people since you’re living with your friends, so that’s a part of it. But I think a bigger part is that I’m no longer doing debate.

These statements, among others, persuaded me to include the term *balance* in the focus group sessions.

I inserted the term in two different contexts. First, as a probing question under extracurricular involvement, I asked “How did you balance your involvement in these activities with your academic obligations?” Second, I devoted a primary question to the concept of finding balance: “Participants have mentioned efforts to and struggles with finding balance in their lives during the time of 4+ AP courses. What are your thoughts on finding balance in your life during that time?” I included five probing questions as options to help flesh out participants’ thoughts about balance in their lives during the time of taking four or more AP courses concurrently (see Appendices K & L). I must note,

however, that I didn't ask all probing questions. I only selected questions that might not have been covered by previous responses. Additionally, focus group participants had copies of the protocol and were able to see all probing questions, whether or not the questions were asked; thus, responses may have been shaped by participants' mental selection of a particular probing question. Three clusters comprise this key theme: (a) definitions of balance, (b) experiences, and (c) retrospective views.

Definitions of balance. As a probing question, I asked focus group participants to first define *balance*. The first focus group provided more general definitions than did the second. In response to the focus group question, Shriya stated, "I think just having time for not only the things you want to do for other people but also for yourself." As an example, she explained that in jobs, "our bosses are always reminding us to take time for ourselves because you can't function if you're not healthy." Adding the wisdom of her age and experience, Anne expanded:

Balance—having the time to do everything well in your life whether that is the school itself or your job or an activity. Making sure that you have time to devote to each of those things that you want to spend your time on as well as having a little bit of time that you can do whatever you want, even if it means it does nothing productive for anyone else.

Leading the responses of his focus group, Rex offered his definition with personal examples: "trying to make sure that I was getting all of my assignments done, getting my stuff for debate done, and then also...finding time to sleep and then socialize with people when I could." John agreed and added, "prioritizing and trying to figure out why you have things in that order was important."

These perceived definitions of *balance* help give meaning to participants' memories of it and how they sought balance in their lives while taking multiple AP courses concurrently.

Experiences. The three participants who directly mentioned *balance* during interviews or written reflections also expressed their difficulties. Evan wrote, "I was not very successful with swimming my senior year, I had relationships end, and I got in a nine month fight with my dad where we did not speak." He didn't necessarily feel that taking multiple AP courses was to blame; however, he did admit that "it took away time...spent with [his] dad or preparing for swimming, but [he] consciously chose schoolwork over other things." As a result, he stated, "I have had to live with my choices." Jane also recorded pressure from multiple directions: "I felt the pressure to perform in my extracurricular activities, pressure to spend time with my family, boyfriend, and friends, and pressure to keep straight A's in my classes." She attributed much of this pressure to getting "accepted into a top university." Jessica discovered that "if you don't balance out your social life well, you manage to lose some of your friends." Earlier in her interview, Jessica had described herself as "very social, very outgoing" prior to her sophomore year; however, when her goals changed, she felt distanced from some of her friends. The pressures participants faced to balanced the different aspects of their lives became clearer during the focus groups.

When discussing involvement in extracurricular activities during both focus groups, I articulated a probing question that would provide further insight into how participants might have balanced academic and non-academic activities (see Appendix K). During his focus group, Rex immediately responded with a laugh, "I was very poor at

it,” followed by an explanation: “I misprioritized my things. I should have taken more from activities space to class space...I think the nature of debate was part of it.” In contrast, Anne submitted, “I think that at the time I thought that I was balancing everything well. And based on how everything turned out, you know, I did well in my classes. I did well, you know, in my activities.” However, she also paused a minute then admitted that her daily tasks suffered—“reading, math problems, anything that didn't have to be turned in for a grade”—resulting in the need “to cram everything in those last minutes before the test or the paper.”

The second focus group opted to respond more indirectly. Ronald and Aaron bantered a bit about their debate experiences, specifically the impact of missing so much school. Both agreed that Ronald handled the absences slightly better, mainly due to his counter-strategy of skipping more school to catch up the work missed. John believed that his music skills suffered a little due to the amount of time required by AP courses. Sophia experienced the opposite in placing more focus on her golf performance than on her coursework.

I also asked participants of the first focus group whether or not they tried to seek balance. Shriya admitted that she didn't think of it that way while in high school because she tried to keep up with what her friends were doing and with what colleges were looking for. Like Shriya, Anne, who felt that she did not seek balance, had college in mind: “I think even the stuff I did for fun...I also had a goal of being a well-rounded person when it came to college applications.” Similarly, Rex responded:

The ways I wanted to be balanced, I think, ultimately always came back to how it would look to some third party, to a college I mean, as opposed to what

personally can I gain from this or what can other people gain from it. It was more, you know, how good will it look on a college application and whatnot...

invariably it always ended up at that.

The discussion among the three participants in the first focus group reinforced the pressure that Jane exposed within her written reflection.

The responses of the second focus group centered more on their search for and lack of balance. Due to time constraints, the question was truncated to their thoughts on finding balance during that time of their lives, and no probing questions were directly asked. However, participants did have all probing questions in front of them, to which they had been actively referring throughout the focus group session. Ronald led in revealing that what he envisioned as “appropriate balance probably shifted...in an unhealthy way.” He suggested, “I might have been spending too much time doing work and doing stuff for debate, in retrospect, but...that’s just what happened. That was a result of the environment I was in.” Jumping in with her views, Sophia argued “that finding balance was probably what was missing for people that...had a hard time with the courses.” Then, in agreement with Ronald, she continued, “what your ideas are of what’s most important... kind of go by the wayside when you’re under all these stresses from school, ...professors, and your...classmates and stuff.” Advancing their thoughts, John felt that he began to gain more perspective towards the end, realizing that “this test isn’t going to be the be-all, end-all of determining” the rest of his life. This awareness made it “easier...to kind of focus on AP but also realize that [he] needed time away...[to] focus on other non-AP stuff.” Unlike John, the other members of this focus group implied that perspective was not gained until they were able to look back at their experiences.

After a long pause, Dee quietly shared with her group, “I felt like I didn’t really try and balance things very well senior year...I was just all focused about school and...a little bit about music even though it was related to...my senior recital and Scholar in Arts⁶⁶.” At that point, she chuckled nervously and continued,

I think...that’s probably a big cause of my stress because I didn’t really make time for everything else...like just making time to just probably spend with my friends and just have some fun instead of just focusing on school and like college apps.

While Dee spoke, her face scrunched, possibly with the pain of remembering the strife and depression that marked her senior year. Both Dee and Aaron indicated they felt as if they didn’t have enough time for their homework, which added to their stress. Aaron also struggled with depression during the same time as Dee. Aaron lowered his eyes while admitting that he was unable to force himself away from homework in order to find the balance he so desperately needed.

Contributing his thoughts via a written follow-up reflection, Sam also indicated that balance was not his “specialty.” Describing himself as someone who was and is constantly trying to do much more than he “could possibly handle, Sam added, “it’s all about cutting out the extra time wasted with watching TV, playing video games, reading fun books, unproductive weekends, etc.”—mentioning many of the coping strategies others had previously identified. Despite his own inability to balance, Sam also believes that “balance is the most important value and life lesson one can take from AP courses.”

⁶⁶ The high school from which Dee graduated offered students both the Honors Program and the Scholars Program, as previously explained. Dee received both an Honors Diploma and attempted a Scholars Designation in Fine Arts. She did not receive the Scholars Designation, however, because she completed her recital after graduation.

It became evident that all focus group members agree: the ability to achieve balance would have enhanced their experiences while taking four or more AP courses concurrently.

Retrospective views. As noted earlier, Jessica provided the inspiration for me to explore further how participants interpreted the idea of balance in their lives. When given the option to add thoughts during her interview, Jessica emphasized, “I hope that future students...know how to balance out their lives. I think balance is number one thing. If you can’t balance out, that’s....not worth it.” I asked her to tell me a little more about the balance to which she referred. She replied:

Enjoy life, meaning...I don’t think you need to sacrifice your social life entirely. You shouldn’t sacrifice. Your physical well-being’s number one, your physical-emotional well-being. If you can’t handle the stress, you can’t both physically and mentally, then I don’t think it’s worth it...And academically—any of your interests, whatever your passion, don’t give that up.

Many who participated in the study did lose sight of their physical well-being and emotional well-being at one time or another, yet each participant survived the experience.

Though participants admittedly struggled with the concept of balance while in high school, many had suggestions based on their own experiences. In her written reflection, Jane conveyed,

I should spend time working as hard as I can for my classes, but that should not consume all of my time. I should budget time to spend with my boyfriend and friends, but that should not take all of my time, either. I learned to budget time according to how high certain priorities are.

During his focus group, Rex emphasized this ability to understand what is and what is not important. If he were to speak to students trying to do the same thing he did, Rex would want to help them realize “there really are a lot of routes and other options ...to find things that...make you happy and things that you can be successful.” These thoughts were reiterated by other study participants. If she were speaking to a student like herself, Anne would ask, “When you’re really busy, what is the one thing that you say, ‘Gosh I wish I had time to do this?’” Then, she would impart, “To find the balance, you have to find the time to do that.” Admittedly, she hasn’t always been able to make time for her own response: “reading for fun.” However, the last time Anne was able to make time, she emphasized, “I loved it!” Shriya also looks at the bigger picture now more than she did before; she shared the questions she now asks herself to ensure she’s on track: “Is this really what I want? Am I getting fulfillment out of it?”

When discussing their ability to find balance, John and Dee both suggested that students need to budget time for themselves as well. Agreeing with John and Dee, Aaron articulated:

I think it’s beneficial for people, just even if they’re really stressed and have a ton to do, just to force themselves to get away from the schoolwork and whatnot and just take some time to do some stuff on their own that they find independently enjoyable...having the self-motivation to force yourself to at least try and have a bit of balance and not be solely focused on schoolwork is probably the most important thing that I should have been doing while I was taking multiple AP courses concurrently.

Feeling that she is “a little bit better at balancing” as a college student because she has “more free time,” Dee expressed that she also finds herself “more content” with life. She smiled and said, “I feel now I have enough time to do homework and also like hang out with friends and do the things I want to do.” These retrospective views of participants illustrate the insight that can be gained by listening to their lived experiences. Future students who choose to undergo the same phenomenon may benefit from the wisdom of past students.

Successes and Regrets

Despite the many stresses and sacrifices described by the participants in this study, no one fully regretted his or her experiences of taking four or more AP courses concurrently. This fact did not necessarily surprise me greatly, though, as my own experiences as a teacher has included many, many graduates expressing their gratitude and appreciation for their AP experiences. In truth, and as I noted in my reflexive journal, I had also guessed that individuals who may have strong negative feelings about all aspects of their AP experiences may hesitate to participate, especially if individuals are aware of my own background as an AP teacher.

Many individuals who chose to participate in this study attributed their future successes with their rigorous AP schedule. Though he sacrificed having a social life and free time, Jimmy Diesel wrote, “I do not really regret my decisions because I believe that having a promising future is more important than enjoying the present.” Even Aaron, who ascribed his negative health issues in part to his demanding AP schedule, indicated, “I think having me go through that unpleasantness and deal with a lot of difficulties was actually really valuable.” In general, participants indicated that the AP courses carry

considerable merit in themselves and impart substantial benefit to those who take up the coursework. Marcus, indicated that he embraces challenge, wrote, “If you’re looking for a challenge like I was, then AP classes are the best way to do it at most high schools.” James Franco “welcomed the stress and competition.” Sophia’s sentiment reflects that of most participants: “I definitely learned a lot more having four AP classes than I would have having something else.” Each person cited some sort of benefit, whether implicit or explicit.

Even with the benefits, though, participants shared their hindsight, wishes, and regrets in terms of the stress, the sacrifices, and the ineffective or nonexistent coping strategies. Participants’ willingness to offer advice to future students like themselves, as well as to those who work with such students, denotes their belief that taking four or more AP courses is both feasible and valuable.

The final key theme includes four horizons to provide greater depth to the participants’ successes and regrets: (a) definitions of success; (b) perceived benefits, short-term and long-term; (c) hindsights, wishes, and regrets; and (d) advice for AP programming and future students.

Definitions of success. This study focused on the impact of taking four or more AP courses; and although success was not a criterion of participation in the study, the majority of participants considered themselves successful and felt that their AP experiences had helped them or would help them in their future academic endeavors. While listening to the stories of Kevin Elias and Sophia, I began to wonder how they measured success while in high school and if they had felt successful. No one statement from either individual triggered my pondering; rather, it was the impression they left. For

example, Kevin admitted that he did not care about his grades as much as he should have, which affected his overall GPA. In contrast, Sophia cared much about her grades and noted that she had received just an average grade⁶⁷ in one of her AP classes. The initial interview protocol did not ask the first three respondents whether or not they felt successful; however, based upon the first two interviews, I included a question addressing success in the revised interview protocol, used with four participants.

Each of the last four interview participants indicated that they felt successful during high school and while pursuing multiple AP courses. Each participant also measured success primarily through academic performance. Jessica explained, “I did the best I could, and I kind of grabbed every opportunity that came my way; so I think I was pretty successful.” When asked to define and measure this success, Jessica chuckled, then responded with some vagueness, “I think successful is meaning that if I try my best and I got... results that correlated with my efforts, I think that that was success; and for me, that did correlate.” More candidly, Jennifer, who felt “very successful” and “proud” of how she did and what she did, measured her success as the world defines and measures it: grades and performance levels. Ronald kept his definition “in terms of the strict definition of successful that is academic,” and estimated that he “did pretty well.” Also feeling “pretty successful,” Heath calculated his success through grades, competition with peers, and his life outside school.

Since the written reflection protocol was developed alongside the initial interview protocol, I had not included any questions regarding participants’ sense of success.

Regardless, several participants mentioned success in vague terms. Sam, from whom I

⁶⁷ This comment is based on the U.S. standard grading scale, with the following general descriptors: A, excellent; B, above average; C, average; D, below average.

received the first written reflection, mentioned his desire to be successful no fewer than five times. Elliott referenced his success in high school three times, mentioning his study habits and “mental adjustment” to account for “a heightened level of expectations.” Evan also felt successful in academics during his senior year, though not in swimming. On the other hand, Jane judged herself successful in both sports and in her future collegiate experiences. Abby felt that she would not be successful on certain AP exams, which left the impression that she referred to at minimum a passing score⁶⁸; yet her scores indicate success. Jake also mentioned success relative to AP exam performance: “success was highly demanded and expected.” Michael freely offered his own estimation and definition of success: “I felt I was fairly successful in meeting the demands of multiple AP classes. I maintained good grades and social relationships with friends, and also being a part of my athletic teams.” With the prevalence of success appearing in both the interviews and in the written reflections, I included a focus group question regarding personal definition and estimation of success.

Comparable to the responses of interviewees, the first focus group underscored academic achievement—grades, AP scores, scholarships—as marking their high school success. Shriya said, “success was just basically doing well in that class and being able to pass it, preferably with an A.” Rex added that while grades were important, he also wanted to meet the challenge and to feel as if he learned something: “getting something more out of it kind of existentially in terms of, ‘Oh, I know this material; this material is interesting; I have a greater understanding about something to a greater depth’.” Anne agreed that at that point in her life, achievement was important for herself and for her parents. All three felt successful during their high school careers.

⁶⁸ To pass an AP exam, an individual must receive a score of 3, 4, or 5.

Participants of the second group represented slightly different levels and definitions of success as high school students. Ronald felt that the environment created defined success as “getting all A’s” as well as “taking four plus AP classes.” John was also impacted by the classroom environment of AP courses:

I felt like there were a lot more people with the same kind of attitude, maybe, or the same kind of goals as far as academic achievement, which meant that now I can’t really achieve it by...a certain course load or a certain grade; but maybe if I can complete the course load.

Furthermore, John measured success by the amount he “was able to retain afterwards.” Prior to her senior year, success was to “get all A’s”; however, during her senior year, her definition shifted to “doing the schoolwork” and to “just survive.” Dee described her senior year, the year she took four AP classes, as “really tough.” Sophia began to change her views on success after her freshman year of high school, when a lower grade in Geometry caused her idea of getting a 4.0 in high school to go “out the window.” At that point, her definition of success shifted to doing “the minimum” to get to “the next level,” such as college and beyond. This mind shift also represents her definition of success today as she finishes her master’s degree and looks forward to flying F16s.

Now that participants have continued their education beyond high school, their definitions of success have changed. Ronald, one year removed from high school, agreed with Sophia; success is “doing what’s necessary to get to that next level.” However, he also added, “being happy with what I’m learning...making sure I am engaged in the material.” Aaron also cited caring more about what he’s doing and being interested in the subjects that he’s learning as his new definition of success. After finishing her second

semester of college, Dee also sees her mindset shifting from getting the grade to learning the material. In college, John still worried about “each next level”; yet as he looked to starting medical school in a few months, he defined success as “enjoying...learning” in order to know “why it is that you want to learn” and “using that knowledge for something that you want to do.” Having finished both medical school and residency, Anne inserted the wisdom “of being a little older”:

Nowadays, I think just the quality of life matters a lot more to me than racking up the awards, and being the best and the smartest and all that. Especially in medicine...I place more emphasis on treating the whole patient well and not just the disease. It's more important that I am a good doctor, rather than just a smart doctor.

Influencing further discussion, Rex concurred. After his second year of college, he was beginning to feel something “palpably different” than pure achievement: “it’s more...doing what you really enjoy and being good at that...some sort of happiness, whatever that may be.” Perhaps as several participants intimated, the challenges and stresses associated with taking four or more AP courses in high school begin to dissipate with the wisdom garnered through age and life experience.

Perceived benefits, short-term and long-term. Looking back, all participants who responded felt that their time in multiple, concurrent AP courses proved not only stressful in one way or another but also greatly beneficial. Jimmy Diesel predicted:

In the long term, I believe that students are much more likely to be richer, smarter, and more satisfied with themselves if they do take four or more APs at a time in high school. Even if they attend an average university, they will develop the study

skills that it takes to do well in college, and will eventually wind up with better jobs than they would have if they had opted for easier classes.

All protocols asked participants to reflect on the benefits of their AP coursework.

Participant responses indicated both short-term and long term benefits.

Aligning with the desire for challenge that many participants cited as a motivation for taking multiple AP courses, four participants pointed out the benefits of challenges presented through AP coursework. Aaron wrote,

While AP courses are undoubtedly more difficult than the majority of high school courses, they carry substantial educational benefits. The opportunity to take more advanced classes seems to be critical to challenging top students who otherwise would lose motivation to enjoy education.

Likewise, Anne explains, “It’s important to challenge yourself and to surround yourself with people who make you think more and do your best.” Marcus also benefitted from his classmates:

In the short term, being in difficult classes makes it so you don’t have to be slowed down by people who have a difficult time understanding the material. This actually makes it easier to learn because you don’t feel like the smartest person in the room and you have a motivation to learn.

Similarly, Sam found great benefit in being “openly handed a ‘challenge’” for the first time, which helped him to know how much he could handle. The willingness and ability to embrace challenge in high school also had the power of becoming a life-long habit.

Anne expressed her belief that “it’s important to establish a habit of challenging yourself

intellectually so that you are always thinking, always learning”—skills that can impact a person’s entire life.

Though being challenged was a significant benefit for a few, participants more commonly mentioned the benefits of college acceptance, college credit, and college transition. During his second semester in college, Evan still felt as if he “sacrificed a lot with school”; however, he did concede that taking a more rigorous AP schedule leads to “a better chance of getting into the best schools in the nation.” After all, the “rewards of a good college are better since life outside of high school is far more important than life in high school.” Shriya and Jennifer also felt that college stood as a reward for their hard work in high school.

Earning college credit, either through AP examinations or dual credit programs⁶⁹, is another advantage to taking more AP courses in high school. Nine participants explicitly noted the profit of earning college credit. Aaron wrote, “receiving AP credit is extremely beneficial for post-secondary education, especially if prospective institutions accept it for college credit.” Standing out among participants, 18-year-old Aaron transferred 88 credits when he began his undergraduate program. At the end of his first year of college, he was considered a fifth year senior. Though not all transfer credits directly correlate with degree programs, Aaron, Rex, Sam, and Shriya communicated the benefits of finishing the general education classes and of registering for college courses

⁶⁹ In some high schools, particularly in the Midwest, students can opt to receive local community college credit for certain high school courses that align with corresponding college courses. Since AP courses are on par with introductory college courses, community colleges will often approve AP courses for dual credit. That is, high school students will receive both high school credit and college credit for a single course. Moreover, some colleges and universities will allow students to transfer credit earned through dual credit options as well as through passing AP exam scores. For example, a student who successfully completes two semesters (6 credits) of a dual credit AP Language and Composition course and who scores a 5 on the AP exam may be able to transfer the 6 credits, counted as completing the required freshman English courses. Plus, that same student may also, receive 3 additional elective credits for the AP exam score. The ability to transfer credits is dependent upon individual college and university policy.

earlier than most of their peers. Also earning credits through both dual credit and AP exam scores, Abby started college with 34 credits, allowing her “to bypass at least half...of the 13 required general education courses.” Due to this advantage, Abby not only had “more space and flexibility” in her schedule but also had the ability “to study abroad a year early.” Jane noted her ability to save “literally thousands of dollars” through college credit.

By far, participants cited college transition as the most prevalent benefit derived from taking multiple AP courses concurrently. In fact, 14 participants referenced the correlation between AP coursework and an easier transition to college. Elliott pointed out that had he not grown accustomed to cutting back on “play time” and increasing “study time,” then the necessity to engage in “more focused studying” in college “could have been more of a shock.” Kevin Elias admits that the AP classes he took changed his academic outlook. Because he “legitimately enjoyed the classes,” he regained a love of learning that translated into his college coursework. James Franco observed:

I can attest from personal experience that taking such courses eased my transition into college life tremendously. In my first semester, while countless other students were struggling in the rigors of college courses, other former AP students and I had far less trouble.

Other participants reinforced these opinions, mentioning better study habits, acquaintance with subject matter and with hard work, as well as a general awareness of college expectations.

Along with impacting college transition, a rigorous AP course load also improved participants' study habits and time management skills—both long-term benefits. Elliott wrote,

The process of learning how to study like a college student in high school is something that not every student has the opportunity to do, and I think it is vital to take initiative to do so while free time is comparatively plentiful.

Perhaps more so because he had less time, Heath felt that taking four or more AP courses concurrently “almost made time management easier.” Without the time management skills she “started to pick up in high school,” Jane doesn’t believe she would have been able to manage her college workload. Shriya explained to her focus group that taking such a heavy course load “helped with time management and also studying habits...you will kind of learn as you go, how to study, how to manage your time, what you think is important first, and what you don’t think is important.” In agreement, Ronald shared, “if taking four AP courses teaches people anything, it’s probably how to manage their time and how to study better.” Evan, Elliott, Jessica, and John also mentioned improvements in both study habits and time management due to taking multiple AP courses.

Often, the older participants referred to more intangible qualities that will continue to shape their lives. Elliott eloquently expressed:

I think the decision to take multiple AP courses is greatly beneficial. In addition to the rapid tangible gains like college credit, the opportunity to shape a more mature and diligent study plan as a young teen can be very valuable down the road.

John judged that his success in multiple AP courses gave him a “greater sense of accomplishment” and increased confidence. While finishing her final year of college, Jane jotted:

In the long run, it’s definitely a rewarding choice. It prepares students for the stresses of college life and life after college, and provides valuable life learning opportunities. Additionally, some of the material covered and discussions generated are extremely mature, providing a more solid personal foundation for students.

Speaking to members of her focus group, Anne aptly articulated:

The biggest long-term benefit of the stress is that...I accomplished what I wanted, and it put me on the path to do what I wanted to do, which gives me more freedom today than, you know, if I had gone a different way.

And even though Ralph faced significant stress culminating in a serious detriment to his health, he conveyed, with some emphasis, multiple long-term benefits of his schedule:

“KNOWLEDGE, EDUCATION, college education, writing skills, opportunity to pursue future interests at a younger age.” None of the participants who have finished their undergraduate degrees demonstrated overall regret from having pursued such a rigorous AP course load during their high school careers.

Hindsight, wishes, and regrets. Though no participant harbored a deep, general resentment for having taken four or more AP courses concurrently for a full year, many participants did express valuable hindsight, wishes, and, in some cases, isolated regret. These sentiments emerged most directly through responses to the interview and written reflection protocol question that asked participants to provide advice for students like

themselves, and more precisely to the probing question regarding short-term and long-term risks (see Appendices F & H). While the focus group protocols did not directly ask participants about risks or regrets either, several open-ending probing questions provoked participants to reveal hindsight, wishes, and even regrets as well.

As a second semester senior in high school, Aaron knew he was stressed, almost to the point of no return. Yet, less than a year later, he was able to look back at that stressful time in his life and offer words of wisdom:

It seems as if the most effective way of dealing with stress is to preclude its existence, meaning that one should strive to be as productive as possible so as to prevent issues from accumulating at all. However, some amount of stress is unavoidable. At that point, I have found that it is necessary to become very efficient at time management and maintain a balanced lifestyle, even if that means forcing oneself away from an activity to do something relaxing. In terms of my experiences with multiple AP courses in high school, I would have attempted to maintain a driven work ethic, which would have likely prevented the vast majority of issues I faced.

Jessica, who had first mentioned balance during the interviews, would have told herself, in retrospect, to “calm down, life is good, you really don’t need to stress that much.” If she could find more time, she would have gone out and done more, “like taking an art class or something like that, something that’s just not your usual cup of tea.”

Stress was most the most commonly mentioned emotion that participants would attempt to control, if given the opportunity. In line with Jake’s rather scathing condemnation of College Board, which I presented earlier, Jake wrote, “It’s not worth the

physical and emotional toll. Students shouldn't have to be that stressed out in high school." However, he also admitted, "I probably would have done it the same but not worried as much about school." Jake continued, "I was constantly worried about getting a 5 [on AP exams] or making the A that I was too stressed. I've learned that grades are definitely important, but if I get one B+, it won't kill me."

In relation to stress, several participants would revisit their time management skills. If he could go back, Michael might "have tried to use...time more wisely"; however, he "would have definitely taken these same courses over again." Rex would not give up his coursework either; rather, he would have made time adjustments as well: "I should've shifted a lot of my extracurricular time to my schoolwork and...generally been more efficient with how I went about my work." Jane, in retrospect, also alludes to time management:

Now that I am older, I may have tried to get more homework done over the weekends to save myself some sleep on the weeknights. There is nothing worse than trying to "make it" through a day of school while you physically just can't keep your eyes open...I realize...that my health is extremely valuable, and that despite the workload, I need to find a way to keep myself healthy.

Five other participants also mentioned time management in general as areas of improvement if they were to relive their experiences.

Individual desires emerged through the words of some participants. Abby stated her desire to try physics, another language, or even study abroad. Also admitting that part of her struggles were "depression-related," she wishes she "had been a more motivated student with more self-control." Even so, at age 24, she believes that "time and maturity

helped [her] be a better student in college, and...time and maturity will help [her] be a better student someday in grad school.” James Franco, who took “more than a dozen AP tests while in high school,” also shared thoughts related to coursework: “I probably would not have taken so many humanities AP courses. They were dubious at best, useless at worst, and took up far too much of my time. Of course, being an engineering major, I am also biased.” Jimmy Diesel might have lessened his load as well, with fewer courses or fewer extracurricular activities, if he had known that he “wasn’t going to get accepted” into his “top choice institutions.” Since he could not have known that at the time, though, he “would not have done anything differently.” Neither would Shriya have cut back on courses. Instead, she wishes “would have spent more time actually learning” the material presented in her AP classes more fully rather than simply learning for the next test.

One of the more poignant hindsight and regret narratives came from Ralph, who turned to drugs to “cope with the extreme workload, stress, and high expectations.” As expressed earlier, Ralph indicated that he is “grateful” for his experiences with drug addiction. He further explicated:

Again, I want to continue to emphasize that I do not regret my past, nor do I wish to change it. It has made me the strong, resourceful and fulfilled person that I am today. With that said, I wish that I would have had better relationships with my family to cope with AP, academic and debate stress

...I think there should have been more awareness and resources available for those taking heavy, rigorous loads of coursework. I wish that I had developed healthy ways to cope with the stress and workload. I lacked mental health, community, familial and educational resources to process stress and anxiety.

Improving those systems would be a good start. When stressed today, I rely on those in my AA & NA fellowship to process anxiety, stress, frustrations and setbacks.

The lived experiences of Ralph, and also of Aaron who admitted to self-mutilation and suicidal thoughts, point to the necessity of hearing their stories in order to better understand and assist future students who may experience similar stresses and harm.

Those who expressed regret did not regret their difficult coursework; rather, they identified parts of their lives affected by their chosen academic path. Heath declared, “There’s not a course I regret.” The only regret he did verbalize was that perhaps he “abused some of the relationships with some of the people within the [Honors] Program, just in terms of relying on them too much.” Ronald and Sam revealed similar views regarding their sacrifices; however, neither expressed regret for the decisions they made. Truly, the only way they could have made more friends, spent more time with family, had more fun, or been more exploratory in activities would have been to change their schedule, thus effectively changing their short-term and long-term goals. Both Jennifer and Rex, who took their heaviest AP course load while attending a regional high school for gifted students, regret the friendships they lost at that school when they shifted to their own district high school for their senior year. Also, as noted earlier, Jessica does “regret... giving up playing the piano, or things like that” because she focused solely on her rigorous academic schedule.

As Kevin Elias and Rex both point out, hindsight is 20/20. Through the words and perceptions of these participants, readers can begin to make sense of how these

participants experienced the phenomenon of taking four or more AP courses concurrently.

Advice for AP programming and future students. When given the opportunity to offer advice during interviews and written reflections, some participants had little to say while others had quite a bit. However, I think it important to note that every participant offered some sort of advice. As I pondered which pieces of advice to include and which to cut, I realized that I wanted every voice to be heard. With this in mind, I have included at least one piece of advice from each participant, grouping them somewhat in terms of the nature of the advice.

Motivation. Much of the advice revolved around the motivations for taking a rigorous AP course load. Though participants had previously mentioned building résumés for college entrance as a strong motivation, many emphasized the importance of taking multiple AP courses for personal interest and personal challenge. Characterizing himself as someone with “strong values” who tries to live “based on those values,” John reflects his values in stating with wisdom:

Don’t fall into what other people tell you...challenge yourself; don’t ever count yourself out....I think at any time in your life, you’re capable of more than anyone gives you credit for...also don’t compare yourself to others...don’t always settle for what other people are settling for or don’t expect yourself to go to the same places that other people want to go so...just figure out what you really want to do with your life and try to get there. If you want to get there now, try to do it as soon as possible. There’s no reason for you to like waste your time.

John also expanded upon his advice:

I think it's important not to take a class because it sounds like it's a hard class, because you want the recognition of, I don't know, taking a class and doing well on the AP exam. I think it's important to take the class if you know that like that's something that interests you....I think having the right motivations is important.

During her focus group, Anne revisited the opportunity to provide similar guidance:

I think that the most important thing is that you're doing it for the right reasons...that you're doing it for yourself and not to please anybody else....I don't think people should take AP classes or lots of AP classes because their parents want them to, or because everybody thinks of them as being the smart kid.

Though several years younger than both Anne and John, Jennifer counseled,

I don't think you should push yourself trying to get the honors. Just, you know, do your best. If you like to challenge yourself, that's great. But if you're doing it for a grade, that's really a bad reason to do anything."

Encouraging students to think about why they wish to take AP courses, Kevin Elias warned, "It really doesn't matter how many AP classes you take. It really kind of depends on what you're going to get out of them."

Challenge. Heath felt that high-ability students have a responsibility to push themselves: "I would recommend all high-ability students to make themselves high-achieving because...I think that like the high-ability calls for high-achievement and that high-achievement leads to higher ability. And from there, you're just going to excel." Focusing his advice on dissatisfied students, Sam wrote, "If a student is bored with his/her current curricula, he/she needs to take the initiative to take on Advanced Placement because it is a viable challenge and the rewards from these classes last into

and even past college.” Aaron also “would recommend that students have the opportunity to take four or more AP courses at the same time, and that such an option be recommended to high-performing students.”

College goals. Taking the AP courses for the “right reason,” though, presents many angles. Anne’s younger brother Dave Gretson had also addressed students’ motivation in terms of college goals: “it all depends on their goals for college (are they looking at elite schools?) as well as to what level they hope to be challenged in high school.” Jennifer also considered college options when giving her advice: “If you’re really, really striving to go to a top-tier school, then yes, you have to do it. You can’t get in otherwise.” Marcus also noted the college advantage:

It’s more work than the average high school class which means you can’t completely ignore it, but if you’re interested in learning the effort pays off in college. Also, if you’re going to a demanding university, then you will be behind if you haven’t taken AP classes. Most others have.

Ronald suggested that students think carefully about their collegiate goals because:

If you want to go through the application process really intensely, and you want to make yourself into the best possible student you can be and like get into a really good school then it would make a lot of sense. But if your goals are a little bit different, then I’m not sure that I would recommend it.

Jimmy Diesel thought a bit more broadly: “If a student truly wants to eventually have a very high paying job and is willing to work hard, then I would definitely recommend taking four AP courses at a time.”

College preparation. As a first-year college student, Michael advocated, “Push yourself in high school. College is much harder than high school, and one must understand how to work hard to succeed academically.” Rex also cited collegiate benefits as a deciding factor for taking multiple AP courses:

If they are up to the task and have a desire to learn, then they should certainly go for it. After having been at college for a year, they did serve as a good preparation for introductory college level work. Additionally, if a student can handle four AP courses in high school, they [*sic*] will almost certainly be able to handle a typical college course load.

Getting ahead. Both Shriya and Sophia suggested that students think of the financial aspects of getting college credit through AP course work. Focusing on the opportunity, Shriya advised, “if you’re up for it, you should take it because...it’s a huge relief when you get into college and you don’t have to take those classes and it cuts your college career by one year.” Also alluding to today’s economy, Sophia encouraged, “There’s nothing better than getting ahead right now with the way that everything is.”

Personality. Dave Gretson, describing himself as someone who “tend[s] not to worry or stress about things,” wrote that his advice revolves around personality:

If they can take things as calmly as I did, then I wouldn't have any qualms in advising them to take as many as they can. Most AP students, however, are considerably more high-strung than myself, and I would advise them to take it easy, lest the courses destroy their social lives and peace of minds.

Perspective. Three participants cautioned students to consider their options and attitudes before taking multiple AP courses. Calling herself curious and open-minded,

Abby wrote, “If a student still has a lot of lower-level options left, it may make more sense to take only a few AP courses, not four or more.” Sam provided two conditions for students considering a rigorous AP schedule:

I would highly recommend taking on multiple AP classes on the premise that:

—students should be very hard-workers, not necessarily gifted, but willing to take a portion of their free time to school; and —students should be very optimistic, half the battle in AP is fighting stress and handling a new way of learning and grading.

Knowing that she wants to become “a well-educated, skilled trader,” Jane attributes her high school course load to her collegiate and post-collegiate success. She finds it crucial to understand the impact of taking multiple AP courses: “As long as students can keep the importance of their classes in perspective, I would absolutely recommend that they take on the 4+ AP course schedule...In the long run, it’s definitely a rewarding choice.”

Self-discipline. Both Aaron and Elliott offered advice that recognized the importance of determination and discipline. Aaron gave “two general pieces of advice” to students wishing to take multiple AP courses concurrently:

(a) Don't assume that one can do everything with the amount of work to which he or she is previously accustomed, as eventually, one's innate abilities or previous knowledge will reach an impasse, and the inability to overcome that challenge can be disastrous. (b) Avoid procrastination....AP courses are more difficult than many typical high school courses, but that is the point of the curriculum—to stretch and challenge the student. It seems as if many students do not live up to their full potential, but if they were to, even multiple AP courses would not be exceedingly challenging.

Elliott described the type of person who can handle the rigorous AP schedule as someone who “believes that he has the discipline to say: ‘I will re-adjust my schedule and habits around the responsibilities associated with AP courses and make it my routine’.”

Handling stress. Jake wrote, “I would say don’t stress out as much and don’t worry about taking as much as you possibly can.” A bit more bluntly, Sophia counsels, “just don’t freak out...it’s never as big of a deal as it seems like it is; it never is.”

Reaching out. Dee advises students to “be more assertive in asking for more help” whenever needed. Ralph extends beyond students in recommending “more awareness and resources available for those taking heavy, rigorous loads of coursework.”

Each piece of advice differs from the others; and collectively, all pieces of advice may be useful for teachers and administrators who strive to understand the needs of high-ability and high-achieving students who enroll in four or more AP courses concurrently.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Overview

Education is not a static field; it is dynamic. Education is also my life. As I change, so changes the face of education and my role in the field. I have spent the past 10 years teaching general, advanced, and AP English courses at a suburban, Midwest high school. Students who take the advanced and AP courses may be generally characterized as high-achieving and/or high-ability students who care about their studies and who desire to perform well in the classroom. Each year, I see an increase in the number of students enrolling in my AP Language and Composition course. I have also noticed a shift in the majority population from high-ability students identified by the district as gifted to high-achieving students pushed to achieve by internal or external forces. Additionally, these students are often enrolled in multiple AP courses and often push themselves to receive top grades and top scores, competing for college entrance and college scholarships. These increases reflect the national trend (College Board, *7th annual AP® report to the nation*, 2011). As the public becomes increasingly aware of the benefits of the college-preparatory AP curricula, ranging from earning college credit to enhancing college applications, AP coursework is often considered de rigueur for college-bound students (Geisler & Santelices, 2006; Hardgrove, Godin, & Dodd, 2008; Sadler et al., 2010).

Despite the caution that AP courses require more study than general high school courses, these driven, college-bound students are often persuaded to take as many AP courses as possible and also encouraged to engage in as many activities as possible. High

expectations to succeed accompany the increase in curricular and extracurricular involvement, defined by high grades and leadership roles. Among my own AP students, I have noticed that students who enroll in four or more AP courses display symptoms of feeling overwhelmed and stressed, which include mood changes and sudden drops in performance. In my attempt to discover techniques to assist these students in dealing with their rigorous academic schedules, I discovered a scarcity in research focusing on how the specific subgroup of high-ability and high-achieving students enrolled in AP coursework negotiates the lived experience of taking multiple AP courses.

As more and more American high school students pursue AP coursework (College Board, *7th annual AP® report to the nation*, 2011), I have concluded that high schools must consider how the increase in enrollment may affect the social-emotional health of these highly motivated, high-achieving students. In turn, schools must also prepare to meet not only the academic but also the social-emotional needs of these students. When teachers and administrators have a better understanding of how individuals perceived their experiences, more specifically of what types of stresses they faced and how they coped with these stresses, then measures can be taken to aid future students in coping with the phenomenon of taking multiple AP courses concurrently.

As readers review and understand the phenomenon of taking four or more AP courses concurrently for an academic year, they must consider the distinct characteristics and perceptions of the researcher and of the participants, which ultimately affects the readers' evaluation of the results. The transferability of this phenomenon occurs as the reader examines the analysis for its situational uniqueness and applicability to specific circumstances. Dense descriptions of the participants' perceptions include numerous

excerpts from verbatim transcripts, written reflections, and field notes as well as my own reflexive journal.

Through the participants' own memories and perceptions, I have been given a glimpse into the phenomenon as they lived it. From their stories, I gleaned eight key themes which will help school personnel recognize and understand the social and emotional impacts of taking four or more AP courses concurrently. Furthermore, through recognition and understanding, school personnel can investigate and implement various support strategies for high-achieving students who pursue rigorous AP course loads. In addition, these memories and perceptions may be shared with current and future high-achieving students who can glean insight into their own experiences in order to develop healthy coping strategies and to achieve balance in their lives.

My personal experiences as an AP teacher contribute a certain amount of investment in this study. I have been acquainted with the AP program for many years—first, as a student 20 years ago; second, as an AP teacher for the past 10 years. My high school experience was limited to one AP course in one subject. However, my teaching experience has exposed me to highly driven students who embrace the challenge of taking multiple AP courses concurrently. I regularly speak to my colleagues who teach AP courses; I participate in advisory committees for AP teachers; I have participated in and have taught seminars geared toward teaching students in AP classrooms. I know that the coursework is difficult and that both teachers and students confront high performance expectations. I have recognized frustration, fatigue, and sometimes fear in my own students' faces.

During the past 10 years, I have discerned an increase in high-achieving students enrolling in multiple AP courses concurrently as well as an increase in the visible signs of stress in students' lives. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that the more AP courses students take, the more stress they experience. In addition, various recent studies have explored the social-emotional needs of students within two structured, rigorous high school programs: AP and IB (Shaunessy, Suldo, Hardesty, & Shaffer, 2006; Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008; Suldo, Shaunessy, Michalowski, et al., 2008; Suldo, Shaunessy, Thalji, et al., 2009; Taylor & Porath, 2006; Vanderbrook, 2006; Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009).

As a concerned educator of high-achieving students, I designed this study to learn about the impact of taking four or more AP courses during an academic year on a high school student's life. Through analysis of the lived experiences of former high school students who chose this educational path, I uncovered information that will be helpful to current and future students who choose similar paths.

The lived experiences of participants suggest that high-achieving students who enroll in four or more AP courses concurrently have challenged themselves in the past with advanced coursework and wish to continue the challenge at the next level. By taking multiple AP courses, they hope to stand out as college applicants, to earn college credit, and to be prepared for postsecondary studies. The demands of AP coursework, the expectations of high classroom performance and test scores, and the schedules filled with extracurricular activities lead to an increase of both stress and sacrifice in students' lives. Some of this stress can be countered by healthy coping strategies and by the support of family, friends, and like-minded peers. However, the absence of guidance in developing

healthy coping strategies can result in students adopting unhealthy, and potentially life-altering, strategies to escape the stress. In addition, students may struggle to find balance in their lives.

Despite the stress, sacrifices, and search for balance associated with taking four or more AP courses, participants' stories suggest that they did not fully regret their experiences. They valued the knowledge they gained as well as the study and time management skills they learned and applied to future studies. Participants felt that taking multiple AP courses gives students an edge in college acceptance. Moreover, they felt better prepared for their postsecondary studies—both by transferring earned college credits and by being accustomed to the rigors of collegiate coursework. Overall, participants recognized that students will continue to embrace the challenge of taking four or more AP courses concurrently. With this in mind, participants willingly offered advice and insight to help these students navigate the pressures and stresses they may encounter.

High school teachers, administrators, and counselors who understand the perceptions and lived experiences of taking four or more AP courses concurrently will be better equipped to serve not only the academic but also the social-emotional needs of high-achieving students who pursue a similar academic route.

Reflections

The elements of constructivism (Beisser, 2009; Creswell, 2007) align with the way I view my world—as a researcher, a teacher, and a global citizen. Constructivism allows room for contextualization, for transaction, for interpretation, for personalization. It allows me to grow and to change with the data and because of the data. According to

Creswell (2007), individuals with a constructivist worldview “seek understandings of the world in which they live and work...meanings [that are] varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas” (p. 20). Though this definition is limited by the term “researcher,” I suggest that constructivism affects far more aspects of my own life, from understanding students and situations in my classroom, to understanding the messages and the words in various texts, to understanding the experiences and trials in my life. Each day, my knowledge and my awareness change. I approach understanding through my personal lens, interpreting my own reactions as well as the reactions of others, knowing that what is true for me may not be true for the next person who walks through the door.

Each participant in this study had a unique lens through which she viewed and shared her experiences and memories of taking multiple AP courses. Listening to and reading participants’ perceptions on the impact of taking four or more AP courses during an academic year, I noted the significance of parental support. Many participants indicated that parents served as motivators, task-masters, encouragers, and sounding boards. Many participants described their parents as educated and skilled in particular fields; and in many of these cases, parents had completed graduate studies. At times, parents added stress by setting high academic and performance expectations, supporting the findings of Suldo, Shaunessy, and Hardesty (2008). However, over half of the participants also mentioned the fundamental support that parents provided them during this demanding period of their lives.

Ethnicity also appeared to influence both the level of parental support as well as the participants’ attitude towards their academic endeavors. Participants who identified

themselves as children of Asian immigrants remarked that their parents held high performance expectations, yet these participants demonstrated great respect for their parents and for the high expectations. Several of these participants alluded to their parents' hard work and sacrifices when immigrating to America in order to provide better lives for their children through education; these participants also left the impression that it was their duty to meet and exceed their parents' expectations.

In addition to parental support, participants noted the importance of teacher support while taking multiple AP courses. High-achieving students can be affected by their teachers' perceptions both of AP coursework itself and of students' abilities to pursue AP coursework., as supported by the findings of Vanderbrook (2006). Students also greatly appreciate those teachers—whether or not AP teachers—who understand and respect their rigorous schedules. Teachers who work with each other and with students to coordinate test and homework schedules are admired.

Friendship, as found and fostered in AP classrooms, also played an important role in the participants' memories. Participants reported helping each other to complete homework and to study for tests in addition to commiserating about their shared experiences. As previously cited, gifted literature points to the necessity of providing adequate opportunity to support the social-emotional needs of gifted adolescents (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Foust et al. 2008; Hertzog, 2003; Reis & Renzulli, 2004). All participants in this study were categorized as high-achieving, but not all had been officially identified as gifted, according to self-disclosure. However, time and again, participants mentioned the social and academic support they gained from their peers, leaving the impression that high-achieving individuals rely on social support as well.

Participants developed and nurtured friendships within their AP courses in order to develop a support network, both immediate and long-term. Thus, enrollment in multiple AP courses significantly shaped the character of their friendships in high school.

Though this study did not focus on social media, the power of social media in the participants' lives cannot be ignored. When I began this study, I planned to use social media to connect with participants; however, I did not anticipate the key role it would have in the study. Without social media, I would have struggled to find eligible participants and to gather relevant data. The young adults who participated in this study were "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001); they have grown up in a world in which information and communication can be accessed constantly and almost instantly through the Internet. These individuals comfortably connect to each other and to the world almost daily via personal desktop computers, portable wireless laptops and netbooks, e-readers, and hand-held communication devices. In contrast, I am a "digital immigrant" (Prensky, 2001); I grew up with local newspapers, library card catalogues, magazines, and land-line telephones. As a high school teacher, I have adapted to the vast world of social media in order to keep up with my students and the world in which they live. My relative ease, albeit learned not innate, with various forms of social media such as e-mail, Facebook, text messaging, listservs, and Skype allowed me to meet participants in their world, using their language.

Potential participants could respond quickly and easily to my requests via e-mail and Facebook, regardless of the time of day. Interview times were verified and directions provided through the use of text messaging. Skype allowed Sophia to participate in the follow-up focus group, even though she was a time zone away. Only once did I speak to a

participant via telephone prior to an interview; and even then, I used my cellular phone and followed the phone call with a text message containing directions. Additionally, participants used social media to connect to each other, whether they knew each other prior to participation or met during a focus group session. I am aware of at least two participants, friends, who chatted online about their interview experiences—comparing responses. One of these individuals sent me a brief clarification the following day. In the spirit of social networking, participants who had not known each other exchanged social media information with each other. After packing up after the first focus group, I descended the library stairs and found Anne and Shriya chatting about medical school. They were exchanging social media information so that Shriya could contact Anne for advice and insight as Shriya begins her medical school journey.

Recommendations

Although findings are limited to a small population of individuals with similar backgrounds, their perceptions of their lived experiences lead to several recommendations for high schools with populations of high-achieving students who enroll in multiple AP courses concurrently. Findings suggest that participation in four or more AP courses is associated with increased perceptions of stress and that coping strategies correlate with emotional well-being.

High schools should consider providing more resources to support the academic, physical, and social-emotional health of students who take rigorous course loads. Understanding the stress that high-achieving students experience as well as the rigors of AP coursework may help schools in developing strategies to assist these students cope with the stress. High-achieving students may benefit from ongoing mental health

assessments to determine stress levels and the general mental well-being of students while taking rigorous course loads. High schools should offer an orientation for students who register for AP coursework. Designed to help students prepare for the academic, physical, and social-emotional demands of rigorous AP coursework, the orientation should include input and advice from physicians, mental health professionals, AP and general education teachers, parents of current and former AP students, as well as coaches and activity directors. High schools should also offer ongoing seminars for AP students, covering study skills, time management strategies, stress reduction strategies, and making healthy choices. In addition, high schools should encourage peer-support networks among the network of AP courses.

High schools may also consider providing workshops for parents of students considering rigorous high school coursework. These workshops may introduce parents to the demands of AP coursework, including homework and test preparation; to the potential for unhealthy habits, such as sleep deprivation and poor nutrition; as well as to local resources, such as physicians, professional counselors, and tutors who may assist their students in coping with the demands.

High schools should tap into the power of social media to support students as well. In particular, school personnel could encourage and help facilitate social media communication among high-achieving high school students, creating an extended support network to help these students develop healthy coping strategies and attain balance in their lives. High school personnel may also use social media communication to forge connections between former and current high-achieving high school students with rigorous AP schedules. Such connections would enable current high school students to

benefit from the experiences, reflections, and advice of former students who took multiple AP courses concurrently.

High school personnel who work with high-achieving students should be aware that these students are more prone to stress related to academic demands as well as future plans. These students may also experience additional stress related to extracurricular and familial demands that will likely exacerbate symptoms of stress. Teachers, both AP and non-AP, may also benefit from workshops that address the social-emotional demands of AP coursework, which includes stress related to homework and test preparation; the importance of support networks; the need for flexibility; and the potential for unhealthy habits. Teachers should also be made aware of professional services available to assist students in coping with the demands. In addition, school districts should encourage middle school and high school teachers to incorporate pre-AP skills and strategies into curriculum at all levels in order to prepare students for the academic demands of AP coursework. High schools should consider forming an AP council to encourage cooperation and flexibility among AP teachers. In addition, AP teachers themselves may wish to examine the heavy workload in AP courses to ensure the work reflects the challenging AP curriculum as defined by the College Board, instead of simply more work in general.

Implications for Future Study

This study focused on the lived experiences of a small population of graduates from large high schools who took four or more AP programs. Most participants graduated from the same suburban, Midwest high school; and all but one participant attended large high schools within a single Midwest state. Participants also indicated that they attended

schools that, by and large, were supportive of their efforts and that they were surrounded by like-minded peers during their educational experiences. Future studies should address diverse demographics of AP programming such as urban, rural, and international. Future studies might examine the curriculum AP and pre-AP programming within schools. Researchers should consider the demographics of participants, including socioeconomic status, gender, and pre-AP preparation. Also, researchers should look at the educational environments of participants' schools.

Participants in this study were identified as high-achieving; some also identified as gifted, or high-ability, but not all participants disclosed this information. Future studies should compare high-achieving high school students to high-achieving students identified as gifted. Furthermore, participants experienced general success, as measured by performance. Future studies may wish to focus on individuals who did not experience success, as measured by low classroom performance or low AP exam scores.

Researchers should also consider the impact of family background and ethnicity on high-achieving students. Future studies should explore whether the educational background of parents and siblings influences expectations and stress. Also, researchers should also investigate the role ethnicity may play in the lives of high-achieving students.

All participants had already graduated from high school, with graduation dates ranging from several months to twelve years prior to this study. The data collected was based on their memories and recollections of lived experiences. Future researchers should look at students who are currently taking four or more AP courses concurrently in order to analyze real-time experiences.

Final thoughts

As a researcher, my worldview is determined by four elements: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology (Beisser, 2009). These elements of the constructivist worldview, seeking individual and unique meanings, support the aforementioned definition. Reality, ontology, is constructed; “subjective meanings...are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others...and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). Reflecting upon my own experiences, past and present, I find truth in this explanation: only through extended observation and personal interactions can I truly begin to see and to understand the contextual reality of any situation. In discovering knowledge, I “can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other person” (Creswell, p. 21).

As an educator, I spend much of my life listening and observing, trying to put together puzzle pieces to form whole impressions or images; thus, the mutual interpretive nature of constructivism appeals to me as a researcher. In addition, as I interpret data, I must also address the axiology or values that lie behind any interpretation. Creswell (2007) writes, “[Constructivists] recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation, and they ‘position themselves’ in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (p. 21). With awareness of my own involvement in the research or of my personal lenses through which I interpret the data, I can reliably interpret the data I have collected.

My own constructivist worldview allows me to approach understanding through my personal lens, interpreting my own reactions as well as the reactions of others,

knowing that what is true for me may not be true for the next person. Divorcing myself momentarily from my identity as researcher and returning to my identity as teacher, I experienced pride in listening to the accomplishments and maturity of the former high school AP students who participated in this study. They stand not only as a representation of successful AP students across the United States but also as a reflection of the product of my own AP classroom.

This study presents a phenomenon through the interpretations of both participants' perspectives and my own perspective. The results of this study may encourage AP teachers to take into account the positive potentials of facilitating friendships, implementing social media, and creating social networks within AP classrooms. In the future, gifted literature and AP literature will benefit from further study into the social-emotional health of students in AP classrooms. Additionally, the lived experiences of participants in this study may guide future research in the areas of stress and coping strategies within AP programming.

Most important, however, this study highlights the voices of individuals who took four or more AP courses concurrently. Participants shared their stories with enthusiasm and with honesty, expressing thankfulness for the opportunity both to reveal their experiences and to help future students. High-achieving high school students who fill their schedules with multiple AP courses may gain insight into their own experiences through the lived experiences of former students who pursued similar schedules.

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APPENDIX A. HUMAN SUBJECTS COMPLIANCE

Appendix A

Human Subjects Compliance

Protecting Human Subject Research Participants

Page 1 of 1



APPENDIX B. SAMPLE DATABASE SEARCH

Appendix B

Sample Database Search

Date	Database	Search Terms	Limiters	# of articles	articles saved	Key Titles/Authors
5/15/10	Google Scholar	coping strategies of students who take multiple AP courses			2	"Advanced Placement: Do minorities have equal opportunity?" (Klopfenstein, 2003); "Social coping among gifted high school students and its relationship to self-concept" (Swiatek, 2000); "Helping adolescents adjust to giftedness" (Buescher & Higham, 1990)
5/15/10	Google Books	coping strategies of students who take multiple AP courses			1	<i>Stress, Appraisal, and coping</i> (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)
5/15/10	Google Scholar	coping strategies of gifted high school students			10	"An empirical investigation of the social coping strategies used by gifted adolescents" (Swiatek, 1995); "Stress, stressors and coping among high school students" (Anda, Baroni, Boskin, Buchwald, Morgan, Ow, Gold, & Weiss, 2000); "Dimensions of Emotional Intelligence and Their Relationships with Social Coping Among Gifted Adolescents in Hong Kong" (Chan, 2004); "Loneliness, Coping Strategies and Cognitive Styles of the Gifted Rural Adolescent" (Woodward & Kaylan-Masih, 1990); "A framework for understanding the social and emotional development of gifted and talented adolescents" (Buescher, 1985); "Social-emotional development of gifted children and adolescents: A research model" (Altman, 1983); "Resilience and coping: Implications for gifted children and youth at risk" (Kitano & Lewis, 1995); "An Empirical Typology of Perfectionism in Gifted Adolescents" (Dixon, Lapsley, & Hanchon, 2004); "Is Giftedness Socially Stigmatizing? The Impact of High Achievement in Social Interactions" (Manor-Bullock et al, 1995); "Psychological and social aspects of educating gifted students" (Cross, 1997)

Date	Database	Search Terms	Limiters	# of articles	articles saved	Key Titles/Authors
5/31/10	EBSCO: Academic Search Complete, E-Journals, ERIC, MAS Ultra - School Edition, MasterFILE Premier, PsycARTICLES, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycINFO, Teacher Reference Center, TOPICsearch	coping strategies and advanced placement	Full Text	6	1	"Coping Strategies of High School Students in an International Baccalaureate Program" (Suldo, Shaunessy, Michalowski, & Shaffer, 2008)
5/31/10	EBSCO: Academic Search Complete, E-Journals, ERIC, MAS Ultra - School Edition, MasterFILE Premier, PsycARTICLES, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycINFO, Teacher Reference Center, TOPICsearch	coping strategies and gifted high school students	Full Text	16	5	"The social cognition of gifted adolescents: An exploration of the stigma of giftedness paradigm" (Cross, Coleman, & Stewart, 1993); "Voices of perfectionism: Perfectionistic, gifted adolescents in a rural middle school" (Schuler, 1999); "Loneliness, Coping Strategies and Cognitive Styles of the Gifted Rural Adolescent" (Woodward & Kaylan-Masih, 1990); "Copout or Burnout? Counseling Strategies to Reduce Stress in Gifted Students" (Kaplan & Geoffrey, 1993); "Intellectual challenges and emotional support of the precocious child" (Sawyer, 1986)
6/19/10	EBSCO: Academic Search Complete, E-Journals, ERIC, MAS Ultra - School Edition, MasterFILE Premier, PsycARTICLES, PsycCRITIQUE, PsycINFO, Teacher Reference Center,	reflective journaling	Full Text; Peer Review	42	4	"Reflexivity: promoting rigour in qualitative research" (Jootun et al., 2009); "Keeping and using reflexive journals in the qualitative research process" (Ortlipp, 2008); "Who am I and what am I doing? Becoming a qualitative research interviewer" (Bulpitt & Martin, 2010); "Developing reflective interviewers and reflexive researchers" (Roulston et al., 2008)

APPENDIX C. INITIAL INVITATION PROTOCOL

Appendix C

Initial Invitation Protocol

I am sending this note to request your assistance for my dissertation. I am in search of individuals of various ages who may be willing to share their experiences of taking multiple AP courses during high school.

At this point, I am looking for individuals who meet the guidelines below and who may be willing to participate in a one-on-one interview or to submit a written reflection.

My overarching question is: How does taking multiple AP courses impact an adolescent's life? More specifically, I want to listen to your experiences while you were taking four or more AP courses.

These are my general guidelines:

- 1) currently 18 or older,
- 2) enrolled in four or more AP courses for two or more consecutive semesters while in high school,
- 3) ability to participate in an interview or provide a written reflection,
- 4) willingness to sign a consent form,
- 5) willingness to submit a high school transcript to verify enrollment in four or more AP courses.

In addition, I am seeking students who have attended larger high schools, with graduating classes ranging from 300-600 students.

I have selected former AP Lang. students to contact initially. I hope to interview six participants and receive written reflections from 20 additional participants; so if you know of others who might want to participate and who meet the guidelines, please provide their contact information below, and I will extend an invitation. If you prefer, you may contact these individuals on my behalf, provide them a copy of this information, and ask them to contact me if interested.

Both the interview and the written reflection will take approximately 1 hour of your time. In your response, please provide convenient times for you. If you agree to the interview, I will arrange a meeting time/place that best fits your schedule. Following careful analysis of all interviews and written reflections, I will assemble a focus group for follow-up questions. Please indicate if you might be willing to participate in a follow-up focus group.

Thanks in advance! I look forward to hearing from you.

Kristine Milburn

milburnk@wdmcs.org or kristine.milburn@drake.edu

1. Willing to participate? Yes No (circle one)
2. Preference? Interview Written Reflection (circle one)
3. Willing to participate in a follow-up focus group? Yes No (circle one)
4. If yes, the best way to contact me for more details is:
5. Contact information of others who may be willing to participate:

**APPENDIX D. INVITATION PROTOCOL FOR RECOMMENDED
PARTICIPANTS**

Appendix D

Invitation Protocol for Recommended Participants

I am sending this note to request your assistance for my dissertation. Your name and contact information was provided by _____ as someone who may be willing to participate.

I am in search of individuals of various ages who may be willing to share their experiences of taking multiple AP courses during high school.

At this point, I am looking for individuals who meet the guidelines below and who may be willing to participate in a one-on-one interview or to submit a written reflection.

My overarching question is: How does taking multiple AP courses impact an adolescent's life? More specifically, I want to listen to your experiences while you were taking four or more AP courses.

These are my general guidelines:

- 1) currently 18 or older,
- 2) enrolled in four or more AP courses for two or more consecutive semesters while in high school,
- 3) ability to participate in an interview or provide a written reflection,
- 4) willingness to sign a consent form,
- 5) willingness to submit a high school transcript to verify enrollment in four or more AP courses.

In addition, I am seeking students who have attended larger high schools, with graduating classes ranging from 300-600 students.

I hope to interview six participants and receive written reflections from 20 additional participants; so if you know of others from Iowa who might want to participate and who meet the guidelines, please provide their contact information below, and I will extend an invitation. If you prefer, you may contact these individuals on my behalf, provide them a copy of this information, and ask them to contact me if interested.

Both the interview and the written reflection will take approximately 1 hour of your time. In your response, please provide convenient times for you. If you agree to the interview, I will arrange a meeting time/place that best fits your schedule. Following careful analysis of all interviews and written reflections, I will assemble a focus group for follow-up questions. Please indicate if you might be willing to participate in a follow-up focus group.

Thanks in advance! I look forward to hearing from you.

Kristine Milburn
milburnk@wdmcs.org or kristine.milburn@drake.edu

1. Willing to participate? Yes No (circle one)
2. Preference? Interview Written Reflection (circle one)
3. Willing to participate in a follow-up focus group? Yes No (circle one)
4. If yes, the best way to contact me for more details is:
5. Contact information of others who may be willing to participate:

APPENDIX E. INFORMED CONSENT—INTERVIEW

Appendix E

Informed Consent—Interview

Kristine Milburn
150 S Prairie View Dr, Unit 1109
West Des Moines, IA 50266
milburnk@wdmcs.org
(home) 515-327-1913

Informed Consent Form—Interview (Drake University)

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The main purpose of this dissertation project is to gain an understanding of how taking multiple AP courses impacts a high school student's life. I want to listen to your experiences while taking multiple AP courses. The interview will take about an hour and will be recorded. You will be asked to talk about your experiences as a student who took four or more AP courses for at least two consecutive semesters.

This study is designed to obtain new knowledge about the AP experience, which may help future AP students. While you may not personally or directly benefit from the results of this study, I hope to gain insight into the impacts that taking multiple AP courses may have on students' lives. For your time, I will offer you a \$10 Starbucks gift card.

Your participation poses no risk beyond those risks experienced in everyday life. You will be asked to speak about your experiences, and I will provide an open, comfortable, and confidential environment. At any time, you may ask questions about the nature and purpose of the project; possible benefits and risks; your rights as a participant, including your right to privacy; or any other aspect of the research. You may also withdraw from the interview at any time, and you will still receive the gift card.

During the interview, I will ask questions and both listen to and observe your responses. The information gained from the responses and observations will be used in the written analysis.

Along with your informed consent, I would like to ask for a copy of your high school transcript to verify your enrollment in four or more AP courses during one school year. If you don't have one with you today, you can send an electronic copy via e-mail. I will blacken all identifying information as well as grades; the transcript will be used only for verification purposes.

The following are the terms of participating in this interview:

- The information obtained during this project will be used in the preparation of my dissertation, which will be published. An oral summary of the research will be presented as part of my defense.
- Your identity will be kept confidential, and I will use a pseudonym when referring to you during data collection and in the written analysis. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when I present this study. I may employ a transcriptionist to transcribe the interview, but I will select pseudonyms and mask your identity prior to transcription.
- All digital audio recordings will be identified by pseudonyms and will be stored in a password protected folder on my home computer, separate from the transcribed interviews. All hard copies of data will be secured in a locked file cabinet in my home. Aside from the transcriptionist and myself, the researcher, no other person will have access to the raw data.
- All digital data will be destroyed via a digital shredding program five years following publication of my dissertation. All hard copies of data will be shredded five years following publication of my dissertation.
- You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time prior to the third revision of the analysis, for any reason, and the data will be returned to you upon request. Your participation is completely voluntary. Please share only what you are comfortable with sharing. You may decline to participate, or you may choose not to answer any particular question that I ask. Withdrawing from the project will not result in any negative consequences for you; you may keep the gift card for your willingness to participate.
- You may be asked to participate in a follow-up focus group. Participation is voluntary.
- You will receive a copy of the analysis, if requested, before the final draft is submitted and may negotiate changes with me, the researcher. If you do not request a copy of the analysis, I may ask you to participate in a member check of the analysis.
- Upon request, you will receive a copy of the final analysis soon after completion.
- You will receive a copy of this consent form.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project, please feel free to contact me at any time. If you would like to talk to someone other than me, please feel free to contact my advisor, Dr. Sally Beisser, at Drake University, School of Education:

telephone, 515-271-4850; e-mail, sally.beisser@drake.edu. You may also contact Drake's IRB at 515-271-3472 or irb@drake.edu.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Kristine Milburn

~~~~~  
**Statement of consent**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I voluntarily consent to participate in an interview conducted by Kristine Milburn for her dissertation under the aforementioned terms.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Participant's Name (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Researcher's Name (Printed)

## **APPENDIX F. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

## Appendix F

### Interview Protocol

| <i>Initial Interview Protocol</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <i>Interview Protocol Revision 1</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Overarching question: How did taking multiple AP courses impact your life?</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <i>Overarching question: How did taking multiple AP courses impact your life?</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Along with your informed consent, I would like to ask for a copy of your high school transcript to verify your enrollment in four or more AP courses during one school year. If you don't have one with you today, you can send an electronic copy via e-mail. I will blacken all identifying information; the transcript will be used only for verification purposes.                                                                                    | Along with your informed consent, I would like to ask for a copy of your high school transcript to verify your enrollment in four or more AP courses during one school year. If you don't have one with you today, you can send an electronic copy via e-mail. I will blacken all identifying information; the transcript will be used only for verification purposes.                                                                                    |
| <p>Warm-up/recorder check: I would like to gather some background information about you, in your own words. Tell me a little about yourself.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Describe yourself—age, education, family, personality.</li> <li>b) Tell me about your goals and aspirations.</li> <li>c) Tell me a little about your high school.</li> <li>d) Were you identified as “gifted” at any point during your K-12 career?</li> </ul> | <p>Warm-up/recorder check: I would like to gather some background information about you, in your own words. Tell me a little about yourself.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Describe yourself—age, education, family, personality.</li> <li>b) Tell me about your goals and aspirations.</li> <li>c) Tell me a little about your high school.</li> <li>d) Were you identified as “gifted” at any point during your K-12 career?</li> </ul> |
| <p>1. Today, I'd like to hear about your experiences taking multiple AP courses during high school. Tell me about all the classes that you took and when.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) I'd like to hear about all your high school courses, starting as a freshman.</li> <li>b) I'd like to hear more about the year you took four or more AP courses—what did your school schedule look like.</li> </ul>                                | <p>1. Today, I'd like to hear about your experiences taking multiple AP courses during high school. But first, tell me about all the classes that you took and when.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) If you can, try to recall your high school courses (we can use the transcript as well).</li> <li>b) I'd like to hear more about the year you took four or more AP courses—what did your school schedule look like.</li> </ul>          |
| <p>2. Why did you take these AP courses?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What were your goals?</li> <li>b) What did you hope to accomplish?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <p>2. Why did you take these AP courses?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What were your goals?</li> <li>b) What did you hope to accomplish?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <p>3. During the semesters that you took multiple AP courses, what did a typical day/week look like?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What was your homework load like?</li> <li>b) What other activities were you involved in?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <p>3. How successful do you feel you were in high school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) How do you define and measure your level of success?</li> <li>b) How would you characterize the success of your classmates?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <p>4. Reflecting further on the semesters that you took multiple AP courses, how did these courses impact nonacademic areas of your life? (Social? Emotional? Physical?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) How was your family life affected?</li> <li>b) How was your social life affected?</li> <li>c) What sacrifices, if any, did you make?</li> </ul>                                                                                    | <p>4. During the semesters that you took multiple AP courses, what did a typical day/week look like?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What was your homework load like?</li> <li>b) What other activities were you involved in?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

| Initial Interview Protocol                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Interview Protocol Revision 1                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>5. What sort of challenges did you face during the time you took four or more AP courses at one time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Looking back, which of these do you associate with taking multiple AP courses?</li> <li>b) Explain the impact of these challenges on your life.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                               | <p>5. Reflecting further on the semesters that you took multiple AP courses, how did these courses impact nonacademic areas of your life? (Social? Emotional? Physical?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) How was your family life affected?</li> <li>b) How was your social life affected?</li> <li>c) What sacrifices, if any, did you make?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                      |
| <p>6. What sort of stresses did you face during the time you took four or more AP courses at one time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Looking back, which of these do you associate with taking multiple AP courses?</li> <li>b) Explain the impact of these stresses on your life.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <p>6. What sort of challenges did you face during the time you took four or more AP courses at once?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Looking back, which of these do you associate with taking multiple AP courses?</li> <li>b) Explain the impact of these challenges on your life.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <p>7. What sort of support structures, if any, did you have while you took multiple AP courses?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Looking back, how well did you deal with the demands and impacts of taking multiple AP courses during a semester?</li> <li>b) Do you remember what particular things helped you deal with the stresses and challenges? Which of these things was most effective?</li> <li>c) Now that you are older (and wiser), what would you have done differently?</li> </ul> | <p>7. What sort of stresses did you face during the time you took four or more AP courses at one time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Looking back, which of these do you associate with taking multiple AP courses?</li> <li>b) Explain the impact of these stresses on your life.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <p>8. What advice would you give to students like yourself?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Would you recommend that others follow the same route as you, taking four or more AP courses each at one time?</li> <li>b) Why? (Short- term risks/benefits? Long-term risks/benefits?)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <p>8. What sort of support structures, if any, did you have while you took multiple AP courses?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Looking back, how well did you deal with the demands and impacts of taking multiple AP courses during a year?</li> <li>b) Do you remember what particular things helped you deal with the stresses and challenges? Which of these things was most effective?</li> <li>c) Now that you are older (and wiser), what would you have done differently?</li> </ul> |
| <p>Closing: We are coming to the end of our interview. Is there anything you would like to add?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <p>9. Is there a difference between high-achieving and high-ability students in terms of taking AP courses?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) If so, why?</li> <li>b) If not, why not?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <p>Note: I would like you to have the opportunity to choose your own pseudonym, if you'd like.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <p>10. What advice would you give to students like yourself?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Would you recommend that others follow the same route as you, taking four or more AP courses each at one time?</li> <li>c) Why? (Short- term risks/benefits? Long-term risks/benefits?)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <p>Closing: We are coming to the end of our interview. Is there anything you would like to add?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <p>Note: I would like you to have the opportunity to choose your own pseudonym, if you'd like.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

**APPENDIX G. INFORMED CONSENT—WRITTEN REFLECTION**



## Appendix G

### Informed Consent—Written Reflection

Kristine Milburn  
150 S Prairie View Dr, Unit 1109  
West Des Moines, IA 50266  
milburnk@wdmcs.org  
(home) 515-327-1913

#### Informed Consent Form—Written Reflection (Drake University)

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to write a reflection of your experiences. The main purpose of this dissertation project is to gain an understanding of how taking multiple AP courses impacts a high school student's life. I want to read about experiences while taking multiple AP courses. The written reflection should take about an hour and will be sent via e-mail. You will be asked to write about your experiences as a student who took four or more AP courses for at least two consecutive semesters.

This study is designed to obtain new knowledge about the AP experience, which may help future AP students. While you may not personally or directly benefit from the results of this study, I hope to gain insight into the impacts that taking multiple AP courses may have on students' lives. For your time, I will offer you a \$5 Starbucks gift card.

Your participation poses no risk beyond those risks experienced in everyday life. You will be asked to write about your experiences, and I will provide an open, comfortable, and confidential environment. At any time, you may ask questions about the nature and purpose of the project; possible benefits and risks; your rights as a participant, including your right to privacy; or any other aspect of the research. You may also withdraw your written reflection at any time, and you will still receive the gift card.

For the written reflection I will ask you to respond to questions, though you have the freedom to add other information. The information gained from your written, e-mailed response will be used in the written analysis.

Along with your informed consent, I would like to ask for a copy of your high school transcript to verify your enrollment in four or more AP courses during one school year. If you don't have one with you today, you can send an electronic copy via e-mail. I will blacken all identifying information as well as grades; the transcript will be used only for verification purposes.

The following are the terms of participating in this reflection:

- The information obtained during this project will be used in the preparation of my dissertation, which will be published. An oral summary of the research will be presented as part of my defense.
- Your identity will be kept confidential, and I will use a pseudonym when referring to you during data collection and in the written analysis. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when I present this study.
- I will remove or blacken all personal identifiers within the written reflection and academic transcript. All electronic files will be identified by pseudonyms and will be stored in a password protected folder on my home computer. All hard copies of data will be secured in a locked file cabinet in my home. No other person will have access to the raw data.
- All digital data will be destroyed via a digital shredding program five years following publication of my dissertation. All hard copies of data will be shredded five years following publication of my dissertation.
- You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time prior to the third revision of the analysis, for any reason, and the data will be returned to you upon request. Your participation is completely voluntary. Please share only what you are comfortable with sharing. You may decline to participate, or you may choose not to answer any particular question that I ask. Withdrawing from the project will not result in any negative consequences for you; you may keep the gift card for your willingness to participate.
- You may be asked to participate in a follow-up focus group. Participation is voluntary.
- You will receive a copy of the analysis, if requested, before the final draft is submitted and may negotiate changes with me, the researcher. If you do not request a copy of the analysis, I may ask you to participate in a member check of the analysis.
- Upon request, you will receive a copy of the final analysis soon after completion.
- You will receive a copy of this consent form.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project, please feel free to contact me at any time. If you would like to talk to someone other than me, please feel free to contact my advisor, Dr. Sally Beisser, at Drake University, School of Education: telephone, 515-271-4850; e-mail, [sally.beisser@drake.edu](mailto:sally.beisser@drake.edu). You may also contact Drake's IRB at 515-271-3472 or [irb@drake.edu](mailto:irb@drake.edu).



## **APPENDIX H. WRITTEN REFLECTION PROTOCOL**

## Appendix H

### Written Reflection Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to submit a written reflection of your experiences while taking four or more AP courses during one school year. In his book, *Researching Lived Experience*, Max Van Manen (1990) provides useful advice that will help you reflect on your lived experiences. I've summarized his advice<sup>70</sup>:

- Describe the experience as you lived through it,
- Describe the experience from the inside...like a state of mind,
- Focus on a singular, particularly vivid, example or incident,
- Describe specific feelings and sensory perceptions,
- Avoid the temptation to “beautify” your reflection with ornamental language and terminology.

In essence, I simply want to hear your thoughts, through your own words, on your lived experiences while taking multiple AP courses.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Overarching question: How did taking multiple AP courses impact your life?</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Along with your informed consent, I would like to ask for a copy of your high school transcript to verify your enrollment in four or more AP courses during one school year. You can send an electronic copy via e-mail; or, if you wish to mail all these documents, you may certainly do so. I will blacken all identifying information; the transcript will be used only for verification purposes.                       |
| <p>I would like to gather some background information about you, in your own words. Write a little about yourself.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Describe yourself—age, education, family, personality.</li> <li>b) Briefly describe your goals and aspirations.</li> <li>c) Briefly describe your high school.</li> <li>d) Were you identified as “gifted” at any point during your K-12 career?</li> </ul> |
| <p>1. I would like to know more about your experiences taking multiple AP courses during high school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) If possible, include all your high school courses, starting as a freshman.</li> <li>b) I'd like to know more about the year you took four or more AP courses—what did your school schedule look like.</li> </ul>                                                         |
| <p>2. Why did you take these AP courses?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What were your goals?</li> <li>b) What did you hope to accomplish?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <p>3. During the semesters that you took multiple AP courses, what did a typical day/week look like?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What was your homework load like?</li> <li>b) What other activities were you involved in?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                      |

<sup>70</sup> From Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*, p. 64-65. New York: State University of New York Press.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>4. Reflecting further on the semesters that you took multiple AP courses, how did these courses impact nonacademic areas of your life? (Social? Emotional? Physical?)</p> <p>a) How was your family life affected?</p> <p>b) How was your social life affected?</p> <p>c) What sacrifices, if any, did you make?</p>                                                                                                                                          |
| <p>5. What sort of challenges did you face during the time you took four or more AP courses at one time?</p> <p>a) Looking back, which of these do you associate with taking multiple AP courses?</p> <p>b) Explain the impact of these challenges on your life.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p>6. What sort of stresses did you face during the time you took four or more AP courses at one time?</p> <p>a) Looking back, which of these do you associate with taking multiple AP courses?</p> <p>b) Explain the impact of these stresses on your life.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <p>7. What sort of support structures, if any, did you have while you took multiple AP courses?</p> <p>a) Looking back, how well did you deal with the demands and impacts of taking multiple AP courses during a semester?</p> <p>b) Do you remember what particular things helped you deal with the stresses and challenges? Which of these things was most effective?</p> <p>c) Now that you are older (and wiser), what would you have done differently?</p> |
| <p>8. What advice would you give to students like yourself?</p> <p>a) Would you recommend that others follow the same route as you, taking four or more AP courses each at one time?</p> <p>b) Why? (Short- term risks/benefits? Long-term risks/benefits?)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <p>Is there anything you would like to add?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <p>Note: I would like you to have the opportunity to choose your own pseudonym, if you'd like.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

## **APPENDIX I. FOCUS GROUP INVITATION PROTOCOL**

## Appendix I

### Focus Group Invitation Protocol

First, I'd like to thank you again for agreeing to participate in my dissertation study, either with an interview or a written reflection. After coding the interviews and written reflections, I have further questions to clarify before writing my analysis. When you responded to my initial contact, you indicated a willingness to participate in a focus group. I am now sending this note to request your participation in the focus group.

As a reminder, my overarching question is: How does taking multiple AP courses impact an adolescent's life? More specifically, I want to listen to your experiences while you were taking four or more AP courses. The focus group will take about an hour and will be recorded. You will be asked to talk about your experiences as students who took four or more AP courses for at least two consecutive semesters. The focus group questions are based upon what I gleaned from the interviews and the written reflections in which you have already participated.

This study is designed to obtain new knowledge about the AP experience, which may help future AP students. While you may not personally or directly benefit from the results of this study, I hope to gain insight into the impacts that taking multiple AP courses may have on students' lives. For your time, I will offer you a \$10 gift card.

I understand the difficulty in scheduling a focus group with 5-7 individuals, thus I request your feedback concerning potential meeting time. The focus group will take place in the West Des Moines Public Library. Please review the following list of meeting dates and times and indicate which would be convenient for you. Then, rank your selections in order from most preferred (1) to least preferred (4). If none of these dates/times are convenient for the majority, then I will select additional possibilities and contact you again.

If you cannot participate in the focus group but are still willing to review and answer the focus group questions in writing, please let me know.

Thanks in advance! I look forward to hearing from you.

Kristine Milburn  
milburnk@wdmcs.org or kristine.milburn@drake.edu

#### **Focus Group**

| <b>Date/Time</b>                | <b>Convenience<br/>(Y/N)</b> | <b>Ranking</b> |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------|
| June 4, 2011: 1-2 p.m.          |                              |                |
| June 7, 2011: 7-8 p.m.          |                              |                |
| June 10, 2011: 10:30-11:30 a.m. |                              |                |
| June 11, 2011: 1-2 p.m.         |                              |                |

Additional Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_



**APPENDIX J. INFORMED CONSENT—FOCUS GROUP**

## **Appendix J**

### **Informed Consent—Focus Group**

Kristine Milburn  
150 S Prairie View Dr, Unit 1109  
West Des Moines, IA 50266  
milburnk@wdmcs.org  
(home) 515-327-1913

#### **Informed Consent Form—Focus Group (Drake University)**

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. The main purpose of this dissertation project is to gain an understanding of how taking multiple AP courses impacts a high school student's life. I want to listen to your experiences while taking multiple AP courses. The focus group will take about an hour and will be recorded. You will be asked to talk about your experiences as students who took four or more AP courses for at least two consecutive semesters.

This study is designed to obtain new knowledge about the AP experience, which may help future AP students. While you may not personally or directly benefit from the results of this study, I hope to gain insight into the impacts that taking multiple AP courses may have on students' lives. For your time, I will offer you a \$10 gift card.

Your participation poses no risk beyond those risks experienced in everyday life. You will be asked to speak about your experiences, and I will provide an open, comfortable, and confidential environment. At any time, you may ask questions about the nature and purpose of the project; possible benefits and risks; your rights as a participant, including your right to privacy; or any other aspect of the research. You may also withdraw from the focus group at any time, and you will still receive the gift card.

The focus group will consist of 5-7 participants. During the focus group, I will ask questions and both listen to and observe your responses. The information gained from the responses and observations will be used in the written analysis.

The focus group questions are based upon what I gleaned from the interviews and the written reflections in which you have already participated.

The following are the terms of participating in this focus group:

- The information obtained during this project will be used in the preparation of my dissertation, which will be published. An oral summary of the research will be presented as part of my defense.

- During the focus group, you will use the pseudonyms previously selected or assigned. These pseudonyms are written on the name tent in front of you. You will also be asked not to share the information from the focus group meeting outside of the group.
- Your identity will be kept confidential, and I will use a pseudonym when referring to you during data collection and in the written analysis. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when I present this study. I may employ a transcriptionist to transcribe the focus group, but I will select pseudonyms and mask your identity prior to transcription.
- All digital audio recordings will be identified by pseudonyms and will be stored in a password protected folder on my home computer, separate from the transcribed interviews. All hard copies of data will be secured in a locked file cabinet in my home. Aside from the transcriptionist and myself, the researcher, no other person will have access to the raw data.
- All digital data will be destroyed via a digital shredding program five years following publication of my dissertation. All hard copies of data will be shredded five years following publication of my dissertation.
- You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time prior to the third revision of the analysis, for any reason, and the data will be returned to you upon request. Your participation is completely voluntary. Please share only what you are comfortable with sharing. You may decline to participate, or you may choose not to answer any particular question that I ask. Withdrawing from the project will not result in any negative consequences for you; you may keep the gift card for your willingness to participate.
- You will receive a copy of the analysis, if requested, before the final draft is submitted and may negotiate changes with me, the researcher. If you do not request a copy of the analysis, I may ask you to participate in a member check of the analysis.
- Upon request, you will receive a copy of the final analysis soon after completion.
- You will receive a copy of this consent form.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project, please feel free to contact me at any time. If you would like to talk to someone other than me, please feel free to contact my advisor, Dr. Sally Beisser, at Drake University, School of Education: telephone, 515-271-4850; e-mail, [sally.beisser@drake.edu](mailto:sally.beisser@drake.edu). You may also contact Drake's IRB at 515-271-3472 or [irb@drake.edu](mailto:irb@drake.edu).

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Kristine Milburn

~~~~~

Statement of consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I voluntarily consent to participate in a focus group conducted by Kristine Milburn for her dissertation under the aforementioned terms. I also agree not to share information from the focus group meeting outside of the group.

Participant's Signature

Date

Participant's Name (Printed)

Researcher's Signature

Date

Researcher's Name (Printed)

APPENDIX K. FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL—LIVE VERSION

Appendix K

Focus Group Protocol—Live Version

Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This focus group contains a mix of individuals who responded through interview written feedback. • For this focus group, it has been verified that all participants took 4+ AP courses concurrently for a full year; therefore, “4+ AP courses” fits the aforementioned definition. • All participants will have name tents with their pseudonyms. • The importance of confidentiality will be emphasized both in pre-focus group communication and in the researcher’s initial comments.
<i>Overarching question: How did taking multiple AP courses impact your life?</i>
<p>This focus group is designed to gather further information about how taking four or more AP courses during two consecutive semesters impacted your life. You have already answered this question individually. Now, I’d like to know a little more. I have developed questions based upon the initial feedback; however, feel free to jump in with additional thoughts as appropriate.</p>
<p>Warm-up/recorder check: I would like you to introduce yourselves so that the focus group knows a little more about you as you share your experiences. I realize some of this information may seem redundant; however, I would like the group members to know a bit more about you. In addition, some of your background information may have changed since you were interviewed or submitted your written reflection.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Briefly describe yourself—age, education, family. b) What are your general goals and aspirations? c) Briefly describe your high school and your AP experiences. d) Briefly explain your motivation for taking 4+ AP courses concurrently.
<p>1. Describe the ways that your AP coursework in high school impacted your post-high school lives (college, career).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Positive impacts? b) Negative impacts?
<p>2. During the time that you took 4+ AP courses, how did you define success?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) According to this definition, do you feel you were successful? b) Would you define success differently today?
<p>3. Many participants addressed how taking 4+ AP courses impacted their academic lives. Even though you may have addressed this individually, would you share a little more about the impacts of taking 4+ AP courses on your academic life?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) How did 4+ courses affect your homework load? b) What sort of performance goals did you set for yourself? c) What was the impact of preparing for AP exams? d) Looking back, what, if anything, would you change?
<p>4. Many participants addressed how taking 4+ AP courses impacted the nonacademic areas of their lives. Even though you may have addressed this individually, would you share a little more about the impacts of taking 4+ AP courses on the nonacademic areas of your life? (Social? Emotional? Physical?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) How was your family life affected? b) How was your social life affected? c) How was your emotional life affected? d) What physical effects, if any, resulted from the course load? e) What sacrifices, if any, did you make? f) Looking back, what, if anything, would you change?

<p>5. Many participants noted involvement in a number of extracurricular activities—both school-based and nonschool-based. Even though you may have shared individually, would you talk a little more about your activities and how your involvement in these activities impacted your academic lives during the 4+ AP year(s)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) What were your extracurricular activities? b) How did you choose your activities? c) What sacrifices, if any, did you make in choosing activities? d) How did you balance your involvement in these activities with your academic obligations? e) Looking back, what, if anything, would you change?
<p>6. During the interviews and written reflections, participants shared various stresses and challenges in their lives during the time of 4+ AP courses. The majority of participants treated these two terms synonymously; however, for the sake of clear communication, I will use the term “stress.” Even though you may have addressed these individually, would you elaborate on some of the stresses you encountered during this time and how you dealt with these stresses?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Describe any stress caused by homework and test preparation. b) Describe any stress caused by parents/family. c) Describe any stress caused by nonacademic factors. d) How did these stresses impact your life? e) How well did you deal with these stresses, both individually and collectively? f) What did you do to deal with these stresses? a) Did these stresses prove beneficial in the long run? Explain. g) Looking back, what would you have done differently?
<p>7. Many participants addressed the ways in which taking 4+ AP courses shaped their social lives and their friendships. Even though you may have addressed these topics individually, would you elaborate on how your social lives and friendships were impacted during this time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) How did the AP coursework impact your social life? b) What connections, if any, did you share with your AP classmates? c) Was there a spirit of camaraderie or competition among classmates? Explain. d) Did you develop friendships with your AP classmates? Explain. e) If your friends were in the same courses, do you perceive any benefits or detriments caused by these friendships? f) Looking back, would you have changed anything about your social life? Explain.
<p>8. Participants have mentioned a variety of coping strategies to deal with the stresses they faced during the time of 4+ AP courses. Even though you may have mentioned coping strategies earlier, please share a little more about the coping strategies—both those that you consider healthy and those you consider unhealthy—that you developed during this time.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) What were some of the coping strategies you developed? b) Which of these strategies do you consider healthy/unhealthy? Explain. c) Looking back, what strategies do you wish you would have tried? What strategies do you wish you would have avoided? Explain. d) Looking back, what support did you need to develop more healthy coping strategies?
<p>9. Participants have mentioned efforts to and struggles with finding balance in their lives during the time of 4+ AP courses. What are your thoughts on finding balance in your life during that time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) How would you define “balance”? b) Did you try to find balance during this time? Why/Why not? c) If you sought balance in your life, how did you attempt to achieve balance? d) If you sought balance in your life, do you consider yourself successful? Explain. e) What suggestions do you have for students like you who might seek to find more balance in their lives while taking 4+ AP courses?
<p>Closing: We are coming to the end of our focus group. Is there anything you would like to add?</p>
<p>NOTES:</p>

APPENDIX L. FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL—WRITTEN REFLECTION

Appendix L

Focus Group Protocol—Written Reflection

<p>Note: Depending upon your responses to the first written reflection and/or interview, these questions may be a bit redundant. Feel free to pick and choose questions; you need not reply to all questions.</p>
<p><i>Overarching question: How did taking multiple AP courses impact your life?</i></p>
<p>This focus group reflection is designed to gather further information about how taking 4+ AP courses during 2 consecutive semesters impacted your life. I have developed questions based upon the initial feedback; however, feel free to jump in with additional thoughts as appropriate.</p>
<p>1. Describe the ways that your AP coursework in high school impacted your post-high school lives (college, career).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Positive impacts? b) Negative impacts?
<p>2. During the time that you took 4+ AP courses, how did you define success?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) According to this definition, do you feel you were successful? b) Would you define success differently today?
<p>3. Many participants addressed how taking 4+ AP courses impacted their academic lives. Even though you may have addressed this before, would you share a little more about the impacts of taking 4+ AP courses on your academic life?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) What sort of performance goals did you set for yourself? b) What was the impact of preparing for AP exams? c) Looking back, what, if anything, would you change?
<p>4. Many participants addressed how taking 4+ AP courses impacted the nonacademic areas of their lives. Even though you may have addressed this individually, would you share a little more about the impacts of taking 4+ AP courses on the nonacademic areas of your life? (Social? Emotional? Physical?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Thinking about this again, how did 4+ AP courses shape/define your social life? b) Did taking 4+ AP courses impact your emotional life? Explain. c) What physical effects, if any, resulted from the course load? d) Looking back, what, if anything, would you change?
<p>5. Many participants noted involvement in a number of extracurricular activities—both school-based and nonschool-based. Even though you may have shared individually, would you talk a little more about your activities and how your involvement in these activities impacted your academic lives during the 4+ AP year(s)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) How did you choose your extracurricular activities? b) How did you balance your involvement in these activities with your academic obligations? c) Looking back, what, if anything, would you change?

6. During the interviews and written reflections, participants shared various stresses and challenges in their lives during the time of 4+ AP courses. The majority of participants treated these two terms synonymously; however, for the sake of clear communication, I will use the term “stress.” Even though you may have addressed these individually, would you elaborate on some of the stresses you encountered during this time and how you dealt with these stresses?

- a) Feel free to elaborate on any stress caused by homework and test preparation.
- b) Feel free to elaborate on any stress caused by parents/family.
- c) Feel free to elaborate on any stress caused by nonacademic factors.
- d) How did these stresses impact your life?
- e) How well did you deal with these stresses, both individually and collectively?
- f) What did you do to deal with these stresses?
- g) Did these stresses prove beneficial in the long run? Explain.
- h) Looking back, what would you have done differently?

7. Many participants addressed the ways in which taking 4+ AP courses shaped their social lives and their friendships. Even though you may have addressed these topics individually, would you elaborate on how your social lives and friendships were impacted during this time?

- a) What connections, if any, did you share with your AP classmates?
- b) Was there a spirit of camaraderie or competition among classmates? Explain.
- c) Did you develop friendships with your AP classmates? Explain.
- d) If your friends were in the same courses, do you perceive any benefits or detriments caused by these friendships?
- e) Looking back, would you have changed anything about your social life? Explain.

8. Participants have mentioned a variety of coping strategies to deal with the stresses they faced during the time of 4+ AP courses. Even though you may have mentioned coping strategies earlier, please share a little more about the coping strategies—both those that you consider healthy and those you consider unhealthy—that you developed during this time.

- a) Feel free to elaborate on some of the coping strategies you developed.
- b) Which of these strategies do you consider healthy/unhealthy? Explain.
- c) Looking back, what strategies do you wish you would have tried? What strategies do you wish you would have avoided? Explain.
- d) Looking back, what support did you need to develop more healthy coping strategies?

9. Participants have mentioned efforts to and struggles with finding balance in their lives during the time of 4+ AP courses. What are your thoughts on finding balance in your life during that time?

- a) How would you define “balance”?
- b) Did you try to find balance during this time? Why/Why not?
- c) If you sought balance in your life, how did you attempt to achieve balance?
- d) If you sought balance in your life, do you consider yourself successful? Explain.
- e) What suggestions do you have for students like you who might seek to find more balance in their lives while taking 4+ AP courses?

Closing: We are coming to the end of our focus group. Is there anything you would like to add?

NOTES:

**APPENDIX M. SORTING DATA SPREADSHEET SAMPLE—SCREEN SHOT
VIEW**

Appendix M

Sorting Data Spreadsheet Sample—Screen Shot View

A	B	C
Name	Primary motivations for taking 4+ AP courses	Primary stresses while taking 4+ AP courses
Aaron	<p>WRITTEN REFLECTION: I took most of my 10 AP courses because they were required by the Honors Program track in which I was participating. This served as the sole motivation for taking certain courses through the majority of my 10th and 11th grade years, but I eventually came to the realization that I actually enjoyed such courses (and the education I was receiving). By my 12th grade year, I decided to take courses not because I was forced to by the Honors Program track, but more because I was genuinely excited for the subject matter. FOCUS GROUP: I was also a member of the Honors Cohort. Um, I took a total of 10 AP classes, and 8 of those were required by the Honors Program. Um, and I guess like Ronnie the main motivation for taking 4 or more AP courses at the same time—I actually took 5 my senior year—um, was basically just it was required by the Honors Program.</p>	<p>WRITTEN REFLECTION: The homework load fluctuated a great deal between various classes and terms. Undoubtedly, the largest (and toughest) amount of work came in the second semester of my 12th grade year, but I would say that I had a fairly large homework load over the three years I took multiple AP courses. On average, across all three years, I probably spent around 25 hours per week studying or working on school-related work. However, this quantity is difficult even to estimate because I periodically developed habits of substantial procrastination or would become distracted from studying to pursue seemingly random things in which I would become intensely interested for short periods of time. // The two largest challenges I faced during my 12th grade year (both in the latter half) were (a) coming out to peers, teachers, and family as bisexual and (b) dealing with severe self-inflicted harm and depression. I was on the verge of committing suicide at multiple points throughout the year; it was only because of the repeated efforts of friends and teachers that I somehow made it out alive. // The first challenge (coming out) was prompted in part by a gender and sexuality unit in my AP Language & Composition class, but was not a direct product of that class or of taking five AP courses. However, the last (and most severe) bout of depression I dealt with during that year (second semester) was in large part associated with taking multiple AP courses. There were additional pressures, such as family-related issues, but I believe that the primary cause of the depressive episode was stress stemming from a seemingly unmountable pile of schoolwork which I had allowed to accumulate. The courses themselves (and even five of them as an aggregate) were not inherently this difficult, but I had not previously been completing enough work to adequately cope. Especially in the case of my AP Language & Composition course, where the vast majority of the second semester was devoted to completing individual ethnographic research projects, I had fallen far behind expectations and seemed to be at high risk of failing the course (if the research was not completed). // The largest stress during my 12th grade year was probably the threat of disappointing academic expectations I created for myself. That year was the first year in which I had to significantly work to keep up with studying, and while I could adequately perform in many classes by virtue of previous knowledge, coursework became something I had to actually work at to do well in. By the second semester, when I began to let my work ethic slide, I became increasingly stressed as I knew I was capable of far more than I was demonstrating. // It's difficult to evaluate the specific impact of these stresses on my life outside of the challenges I outlined in (f), for two reasons. First, the stress of failing myself was a large cause of depression, so in a sense, that challenge was the ultimate manifestation of stress's impact on my life. Second, it is difficult for me to remember other things from that school year—issues relating to depression, suicide, and coming out are by far the primary and strongest memories I possess of that year. FOCUS GROUP: but the courses definitely did raise the homework load. // I think in terms of homework load, the type of homework that was often assigned in the AP classes was different than the other classes. So for instance, a lot of people there talked about busy work that was being assigned in the regular classes or whatnot. A lot of the AP classes, they tend to assign larger projects and so that was just a different type of work. I found that actually a lot more difficult. So for instance, AP Lang, giant cultural research ethnography was fairly difficult for me, but I don't know, I think that overall, it was pretty good preparation. // I kind of had different sources of stress. In terms of college, I actually got all of my college apps done by mid-October and something so, and I knew where I was going, so I really didn't have to worry about that which was nice. Most of my stress actually was probably caused by nonacademic things. So for instance, things related to coming out to people, stuff like that and basically parent/family response. And so that just kind of culminated to a big ball of stress and that wasn't really pleasant. Um...but overall, I guess I mean I managed to get through it obviously and in the long run, I mentioned this earlier, I think it was actually beneficial even though it was really, really sucks at the time.</p>

APPENDIX N. HORIZONS AND THEMES: FIVE ITERATIONS

Appendix N

Horizons and Themes: Five Iterations

Horizons—1st iteration, March 2011	Horizons—2nd iteration, May 2011
Participants took AP courses for the challenge	Participants took AP courses for the academic challenge and stimulation
Participants often noted a love of learning	Participants mentioned college readiness as a primary motivation for taking AP courses
Participants often mentioned college readiness as a primary motivation for taking AP courses	Participants felt that AP courses prepared them well for future academic endeavors
Participants took AP courses for the perceived future benefits	Participants felt that taking 4+ AP courses limited and defined their social lives
Participants generally feel that AP courses prepared them well for future academic endeavors	Participants shared common intellectual bonds and experiences with others taking AP courses
Participants feel that taking 4+ AP courses limited and defined their social lives	Participants gleaned emotional support from friendships developed within the network of AP courses
Participants shared common intellectual bonds and experiences with others taking AP courses	Participants noted that involvement in extracurricular activities contributed both stress and satisfaction to their lives
Participants developed friendships within AP courses due to common experiences	Participants made sacrifices, both forced and self-selected
Participants often looked to friends for emotional support	Participants set high academic performance goals, both GPA and test scores
Participants were often active in multiple extracurricular activities	Participants experienced increased stress caused by high levels of homework and AP test preparation
Participants often mentioned gaining satisfaction through busyness	Participants noted support from parents/family but also additional stress caused by parents/family
Participants experienced high stress, in general, at times	Participants noted stress from nonacademic factors that contributed to academic performance
Participants often experienced stress caused by high levels of homework and AP test preparation	Participants struggled with time management that often led to sleep deprivation
Participants often made sacrifices, both forced and self-selected	Participants developed both healthy and unhealthy coping strategies on their own
Participants noted support from parents/family but also additional stress caused by parents/family	Participants struggled to find balance in their lives
Participants sometimes noted additional emotional stress from nonacademic factors that contributed to academic performance	Participants held few regrets in retrospect
Participants set high academic performance goals, both GPA and test scores	
Participants often struggled with time management	
Participants often experienced sleep deprivation	
Participants often struggled to find balance in their lives	
Participants often developed both healthy and unhealthy coping strategies on their own	
Participants measure personal success by both performance and inner satisfaction	
Participants consider themselves successful in retrospect	
Participants have few regrets in retrospect	
Participants often recommend the same academic path for like-minded individuals	

Common Themes—3rd iteration, June 2011	Common Themes—4th iteration, July 2011
Primary motivations for taking 4+ AP courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance college application résumés • Preparedness for college • Academic challenge • Lack of other choices 	Primary motivations for taking 4+ AP courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance college application résumés • Preparedness for college • Academic challenge • Lack of other choices
Primary stresses while taking 4+ AP courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework load and test preparation • Parent/family • Extraneous stressors 	Primary stresses while taking 4+ AP courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework load and test preparation • Parent/family • Future considerations • Extraneous stressors
Significance of pursuing extracurricular activities while taking 4+ AP courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress • Satisfaction • Coping mechanism 	Extracurricular activities while taking 4+ AP courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time commitment and constraint • Benefits • Impact on academics
Significance of sacrifices attributed to course load: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forced • Self-selected 	Sacrifices attributed to course load: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time with friends and family • Activities and interests • Health and happiness
Primary struggles attributed to course load: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time management • Sleep deprivation 	Impact of family, friends, and like-minded classmates: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duality of parent/family support • Social/academic support among peers • Competition among peers
Significance of family and friends while taking 4+ AP courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress • Support • Competition 	Coping strategies while taking 4+ AP courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People • Unhealthy habits • Healthy habits
Development of coping strategies while taking 4+ AP courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy • Unhealthy 	Search for balance while taking 4+ AP courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggles • Achievements
Search for balance while taking 4+ AP courses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggles • Achievements 	Self-determined successes and regrets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions of success • Perceived benefits, short-term and long-term • Perceived disadvantages • Advice for AP programming and future students
Self-determined successes and regrets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions of success • Perceived benefits, short-term and long-term • Perceived disadvantages • Advice for AP programming and future students 	

Common Themes—final iteration, July 2011
<p>Primary motivations for taking 4+ AP courses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance college application résumés • Preparedness for college/gain college credit • Academic challenge and enjoyment • Natural progression/lack of other choices
<p>Primary stresses while taking 4+ AP courses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework load and test preparation • Future considerations • Parent/family • Extraneous stressors
<p>Extracurricular activities while taking 4+ AP courses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time commitment and constraint • Benefits • Impact on academics
<p>Sacrifices attributed to course load:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time with friends and family • Activities and interests • Health and happiness
<p>Impact of family, friends, and like-minded classmates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duality of parent/family support • Social/academic support among peers • Competition among peers
<p>Coping strategies while taking 4+ AP courses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People • Unhealthy habits • Healthy habits
<p>Search for balance while taking 4+ AP courses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions of balance • Experiences • Retrospective views
<p>Self-determined successes and regrets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions of success • Perceived benefits, short-term and long-term • Hindsight, wishes, and regrets • Advice for AP programming and future students